



WHAT WAS I THINKING !!

The Silent Fears of a Hospital Board Member

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We sit in formation at the long table, our appointment to the Hospital Board of Trustees (and our seating positions) diligently earned by years of loyal service. We listen, we discuss, we make decisions . . . we break for coffee. Yet, despite our dark suits and stern faces with the appearance of total concentration, not all our thoughts are focused on the presentation du jour. In fact, some of us may actually be wondering why we are on this Board at all!

As Board members, we come from backgrounds in business, community organizations, or the health professions, and we apply our life experiences, expertise, and personal insights to each Board meeting. As a team, we share the common goal of leading the organization, but as individual volunteer Board members, we are often perplexed by an unfamiliar healthcare industry model that we find confusing and complex.

Physicians may be either independent or employed; nurses and staff are supervised, evaluated, and compensated by the hospital but they support the physicians; joint ventures that commingle stakeholders and competitors are increasingly common; and all the while, people get paid for their services in myriad different ways. Inevitably, daunting and sometimes even scary thoughts about their decision to join the Board creep into the mind of each Board member; thoughts such as:

1. **“I don’t know this industry!”**

This is true for most Board members, since we come from occupations outside healthcare. On the other hand, we each bring a unique set of life skills to each Board meeting. We know our own organizations, and have a good grasp of business principles, management skills, and governance. As we serve on the Board and learn about the healthcare industry, we are able to share and transfer our abilities and advice to this newly learned industry.

2. **“I’m not smart enough!”**

We all remember the people in high school and college who were driven to be doctors, and

wanted/needed to have top grades so they could get into medical school. But it’s been my observation that the healthcare industry attracts not only smart doctors, but also experienced, intelligent people in other areas of healthcare. And people who are so concentrated on the pursuit of education and expertise in healthcare may not have time to develop the habit of thinking with a broad perspective.

As outside Board members, however, we bring new and varied perspectives to the Board: new ways of seeing challenges, and new ideas for solving problems. So in reality, it is precisely because we don’t come from within the healthcare industry that as Board members we can balance the focused views of many healthcare professionals.

3. **“I don’t have anything to contribute!”**

Wrong again! Of course we all have opinions, which may or may not be relevant, but we also provide our own unique analyses of the decisions, issues, and challenges presented at Board meetings every month. It is vital for Board members to listen, but it is also important that Board members share their own thoughts as the Board makes collective decisions. Each of us is unique, and that is part of the magic of a Board.

4. **“I under-estimated my responsibility!”**

Who knew we had so many employees? Who knew about all the governmental issues? Who knew we had such a responsibility to the community that has entrusted us with all this money? Yes, it is scary – and amazing. We all live in this community and we have been given this wonderful opportunity to give back to our neighbors through our service. From those who have gone before us we see and learn that this challenge (some see it as a calling) is not new, but it is now our turn to offer our time and skills.

5. **“What if they ask me to re-up!”**

Relax, you just got here. As one CEO said to me “Come on the Board, and in about three years you’ll know enough to be worth something to

me!” It doesn’t always take three years, but every year helps. The complexity and fast-paced changes of our industry call for tough decisions and wise leadership and this wisdom can only come with time. Be prepared to step up and re-up for the Board when asked.

And then, one day it happens and you cross over from doubt to slim confidence when you hear those gratifying words . . . “I think you make a good point . . .” and you

know that maybe, just maybe, you belong on this Board. We all have good points, good ideas, and good advice to offer. The individual life skills we’ve each learned along the way, combined with those of the professional administrators and physician leaders who also serve on the Board, create a unique leadership team that:

- Provides leadership and stability to our employees;
- Offers quality healthcare to our patients;
- Creates an amazing health system that is a treasure for the entire community.

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