Advice of the Board Elders
Bob Harris, CAE

We grow up hearing, “respect your elders.” It means to heed and honor those who have knowledge derived from experience that supersedes your own.

At the Bridge Association of REALTORS® in Oakland, California, I asked the board to introduce themselves. Some of the leaders were past presidents, others had served a couple of years, while some were new to governance.

I asked the experienced leaders, “What advice would you pass along to new directors?”

**It’s Not about You** – We serve on the board to represent the diverse interests of members. Don’t approach the opportunity thinking you’ll improve your resume or benefit your company.

**Read to Lead** – You must read and follow the governing documents. Before each meeting their will be reports and updates to read.

**Show Up** – Woody Allen was probably right, "80 percent of success is just showing up." Attendance is expected at all duly called meetings.

**Curiosity** – There are no dumb questions. Ask for clarification before casting a vote. Between board meetings it is good to get answers from staff.

**Group Think** – Don’t be swayed by enthusiastic conversations or motions. The passion of others doesn’t mean it is right.

**Authority** – Be careful how you use your position. Adding your board title to your outgoing email signature makes it look like you are speaking for the association in every message. Don’t usurp the authority of the chairman of the board.

**Social Media** – People are watching and listening to board members, even in informal situations. Be careful what you say where others overhear you. Think twice about posting to social media.
Rump Sessions – Informal meetings of directors is discouraged. A quick call or a brief lunch can digress into discussions impacting the association, governance and transparency.

Transparency – Transparency is a board guiding principle. It does not mean giving away every document or disclosing votes and conversations. There are processes and policies associated with transparency and confidentiality.

Compassion – Respect and compassion are also guiding principles. Always consider, “What would the members think?” When spending money, remember the resources belong to the members, be conservative with expenditures.

Diversity – Another principle that should frame board work is diversity. Be sure to recognize diversity of all kinds, and demonstrate it with inclusion and respect.

Weeds – Stay out of the weeds. Avoid doing committee and staff work at board meetings. The board sets the direction so staff and committees can advance the goals.

Finances – Focus on the big picture. Rather than questioning $50 in the financial report, concentrate on the budget and assets. Ensure that policies safeguard assets.

Multiple Hats – Directors have authority when the meeting is gaveled to order. Outside the meeting directors may have different roles such as ambassador, designated spokesperson or event volunteer, with different responsibilities.

Listen Carefully – Everybody listens; hearing is different. Be sure you comprehend the messaging before formulating a reply or rushing to agreement. Reading body language improves understanding.

Fiduciary Roles – You are a fiduciary on behalf of members and stakeholders. Come to meetings prepared to represent their interests. Fiduciary duties include loyalty, obedience and care.

Member Questions – Members will be inquisitive about the work of the board. Focus their attention of how the board advances the mission and goals. Meeting minutes are not a member newsletter.

In addition to their advice, I would add:

✓ Memorize the mission statement – it should frame all discussions and decisions.
✓ The association belongs to the members, not to you.
✓ The board chair and the executive director work best as equal partners.
 Visit the members in person or make personal calls to let them know you’re a good listener and care; invite their participation. You represent their interests.

✓ Avoid playing “devil’s advocate.”
✓ Encourage 100 percent accountability of yourself, and others.
✓ Understand you are leading a professional association, not a social club.
✓ Attitude is everything.
✓ Don’t procrastinate.
✓ Respond promptly to email and telephone calls.
✓ Celebrate small successes; they will add up by the end of your term.

Wisdom comes from the experience of leaders before us. Their counsel encourages a dynamic leadership team that achieves significant results.

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Note: Bob Harris, CAE, provides free governance tips and templates at www.nonprofitcenter.com.