

Chicago Lawyer®

Volume 35 Number 10 • chicagolawyer.com

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By Christina Martini
DLA Piper



By David Susler
National Material L.P.

'Ask or be asked'

Here's a portion of the conversation. To learn more, watch the video at chicagolawyer.com.

As a young lawyer, how do you break into the nonprofit board arena?

Tina Martini: There are myriad ways to get onto boards. First, you need to think about where your interests and passions lie with respect to civic service. There are so many organizations to choose from, each with different missions, causes and ways in which they operate. Likewise, boards can significantly vary in terms of their level of activity, what they are seeking to accomplish and what they expect and demand of board members. You really need to do your homework and understand what being on a particular board entails.

You also need to understand that getting onto boards is often a process and may take some time. You should figure out the best way to meet the people you need to be successful in your efforts. Sometimes, you must first be a volunteer at the organization or you need to reach out to existing board members and the executive director to learn more about how best to become involved. Sometimes, there are people in your network who are past or present board members who can lend a hand. Other times, you may first need to develop a high enough profile within your community so that you are chosen to serve on the board, rather than the other way around. There are many possibilities, and the right one depends on you, your personality and the board on which you are interested in serving.

David Susler: In a few words, ask or be asked. However, it's not quite that easy, especially when just starting out. As Tina said, you first must consider where your passions and commitments lie. If unsure, try volunteering with

different organizations to learn what they are about, which fit with your interests. If your sights are set on a high-profile board when you're just starting out in your "volunteer career," you may first need to get your feet wet with a smaller, possibly lower-profile organization. Learn what it means to serve on a nonprofit board and how board work fits within your life. Develop your reputation as a reliable and desirable board member. You can help foster being asked by demonstrating your interest and willingness to help others by being actively involved. In due time, you can "move up" to that higher profile board.

How do you get involved without getting too involved?

Martini: It's all about being honest, realistic and communicative about your level of interest and commitment. You need to be very clear on where all of your priorities lie and where civic service fits into the grand scheme. This will drive your assessment as to how much time and energy you have and are willing to give to civic service. You also need to have a thorough understanding of a given nonprofit's expectations and demands on your time and where they all fit in with respect to everything else in your life. Knowing all of these things will help strike that delicate balance.

Susler: This is a good question. Civic service is about service to others, not to yourself. Boards are there to oversee and steer their organizations to successfully carry out their missions, not to pad your resume. I agree that you first need to be honest and realistic about your level of interest and commitment, both to yourself and to those recruiting you to join their board. If joining a board is too large of a time commitment for you, volunteer for a committee or to help organize a discrete program or even to do one task for the organi-

zation. This way, you fulfill a genuine need, you feel a greater sense of connection to the organization and put in just the right amount of time for yourself.

How do people's perceptions of lawyers change as more get involved in their communities?

Martini: It's unfortunate that people's perceptions of lawyers are often quite negative, based primarily on the relatively few bad apples out there. Even though every profession has them, the public is often less forgiving of lawyers, probably because of the special ethical duties and responsibilities they have and the gravity of the issues that lawyers typically handle. My first real exposure to these negative sentiments was when I was in engineering school. Many of my instructors and classmates believed that lawyers readily put a price on someone's life and that they show no remorse in doing so, particularly in the product-liability context. What critics don't seem to appreciate is that lawyers are human beings just like everyone else and that they care just as much, if not more so, about other people than anyone else. People are most often reminded of this when they see lawyers out in the community lending a hand on a pro bono basis to those who are less fortunate. Hopefully, as an increasing number of lawyers become involved in civic service, these unfair notions will be dispelled.

Susler: When non-lawyers see lawyers giving of their time, of their heart, it enables them to see lawyers in another light — as fellow members of the community, lending their time and expertise to help others, without charging money. This cannot help but improve people's perceptions of lawyers. ■

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