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Youth in Action! – Serving on Decision-Making Boards

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Do you ...

Want to get involved in decision-making processes that impact your life?

- Want to participate in meaningful leadership opportunities?
- Have ideas to improve opportunities and services for youth in your community?

Tip: If you come across an unfamiliar word as you read this, don't just skip over it, look it up! This will help you get the information you need AND build a strong vocabulary.

What is a decision-making board?

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If you're a young person who is active in your community, in an organization, or for a particular cause, you may have been asked to serve on a board. A board is a group of people who give advice, share expertise, and provide leadership to direct organizations in what they should and should not do. Boards can be connected to companies, nonprofit organizations, schools, community organizations, or government agencies.

There are many different kinds of boards; the two most common are “advisory boards” and “boards of directors.” Many nonprofit organizations and government agencies have youth who serve as full voting members of both boards of directors and advisory boards.

While there are similarities between these two types of boards, their roles within an organization are different. An advisory board is a group of people who use their knowledge, experience, and skills to give advice to an organization. This kind of board provides support, guidance, and constructive feedback to an organization. An advisory board's role is to inform decisions an organization makes rather than to oversee or govern the organization.

A board of directors is a group of people who make decisions for a company or nonprofit organization. This kind of board is responsible for hiring (and firing) the chief executive officer, ensuring financial stability (including fundraising), and helping set the direction of the organization.

Why Should I Serve on a Board?

Most people who serve on boards feel passionately about the work of the organization and want to give back to their community. Serving on boards can be great experience because not only do you have the power to influence decisions on things you care about, but you can also learn important skills that you can use when you get a job, expand your network, and build your resume. Playing an active role on a board can also assist you in developing and honing your leadership skills, which can help you get into college, land scholarships, and get internships and jobs. Serving on a board is also a great way to learn more about what goes into working in a particular field or at a company and to learn important decision-making processes.

Examples of Where to Serve on Boards

- Local youth organizations
- Arts and youth sports organizations
- Advisory groups for state and local education boards

- Independent living councils
- Non-profit organizations
- State rehabilitation councils
- Workforce investment board youth councils
- Chambers of commerce
- Political organizations

Getting Started

Decide what kind of experience you want. What type of organization or cause do you want to be involved with? Are there arts or sports organizations you would like to work with? Are you interested in organizations that serve youth or people with disabilities? Are there particular political or social causes that interest you? Would you like to represent youth in your community on local and state government advisory boards? Try to align your potential board participation with your educational and career goals.

Get your foot in the door. It's important to get involved in the organizations you want to serve and let them know you are interested in leadership opportunities. Although most nonprofit boards are made up of ten to 20 members, they frequently only have one or two slots open to youth. Advisory boards tend to be larger and may have more opportunities for youth involvement. If you are already involved with an organization, find someone on staff you have a good relationship with and ask them about serving on the board. They might be able to put in a good word for you and serve as a valuable resource for your experience both now and in the future.

Apply to be on a board. Some organizations will ask you to fill out an application to serve on a board. You may also be interviewed by an employee of the organization or other board members. Go through the application process like you are applying for a job. Remember to always answer questions honestly and with a positive attitude, and don't forget to point out your special skills, qualities, and interests.

Good ideas are good ideas. Even if you ultimately choose not to serve on a board or don't get selected, you can still reach out to board members to talk with them about your ideas and the activities of the organization that interest you.

Things to Think About

Understand the time commitment. Before committing to serving on a board, make sure you're able to put in the time and effort expected. Showing you're reliable can help you get a positive reference when applying for jobs, schools, and scholarships.

Assess scheduling conflicts. Find out how often the board meets, what time it meets, and how long meetings usually last to make sure they don't generally conflict with your school or work schedule. But be flexible if you can. If you have too many conflicts, it may appear that you are unable to meet the time commitment.

Find out what you will be doing and what is expected of you. Ask what sort of information people are expected to know? Will your responsibilities include giving presentations, speaking in public, or meeting with government decision makers? Will you be given training before you start serving on the board? If the board meets in person, find out what's considered appropriate attire.

Discuss compensation. Some organizations offer bus tokens, carpooling, or travel and meal reimbursements, while some offer to pay members a small stipend. Make sure you know where you stand with your board on these key issues.

Come prepared! Always ask for a copy of the agenda before the meeting so you can research meeting topics and feel confident and prepared to participate. If you have been tasked with doing something such as research or a survey youth about policy issues, make sure to bring the requested materials or information to the meeting.

Get ready for new words and ideas and be ready to defy assumptions. There will be a lot of terms and ideas you might not know. Although you may have to ask questions, your colleagues will be impressed by your maturity, strengths and the unique perspective you bring.

Remember that your input matters. You were selected to serve on the board, which means they want and value your contribution. Remind yourself that your voice counts. If you ever become frustrated because you feel like you are not getting "equal time," keep in mind that although some adults may not understand how to work with youth effectively, they generally mean well.

Taking action!

Now that you know:

What decision making boards are and why it's important to get involved in them.

- The importance of getting involved in organizations that you're passionate about.
 - The 3 things you need to think about before getting involved on a board ...
- ... **Go out and start participating on decision-making boards.**

Resources

United Way – The United Way is a national organization with hundreds of local affiliates that are networks for many nonprofit organizations in your community. United Ways and organizations connected to them all have boards of directors, and many have advisory boards. To find a local chapter on the page linked above, click on your state and find the nearest United Way. You may want to contact your local United Way volunteer coordinator to learn more about opportunities to serve on boards in your area.

CareerOneStop – This website can help you find your local workforce investment board (WIB). WIBs are organizations that help community members learn skills and get jobs. WIBs also have youth councils that guide their work with young people. Many WIBs include youth on their youth councils.

“Blazing the Trail: A New Direction for Youth Development: A Youth Call to Action” – This short report outlines ten actions that youth can take to enhance their development and become leaders in their community and the nation.

Decision-Making Board

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