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Ten Steps for Building an Effective Nonprofit Board

A Checklist for Action

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August 2011

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Building an Effective Nonprofit Board

Introduction

Recently I published a blog post about the core attributes of a strong nonprofit board of directors as part of an informal series of articles related to board development. This series can be found at the website of [Facilitation & Process](#). My writing on the subject comes from the “blended” perspectives of being both a nonprofit consultant as well as a from my personal service as a “serial” board member for several different organizations.

This paper is an attempt to frame essential elements of an effective nonprofit board. As even a quick survey of the content reveals, my intention in this not designed to be an exhaustive guide to developing and staffing a board. Rather this paper is a practice-based assessment tool that summarizes ten nonprofit board essentials that boards can use as a conversation starter about its strength and effectiveness. It also offers a short list of actionable ideas to improve board functioning for each element.

Following the ten principles is a board composition worksheet, a short bibliography, and an action planing worksheet. It is my goal to empower boards to excel through self-exploration. Yet I am also aware that there are times when you need a fresh, imaginative, and objective perspective. For those times, facilitation and Process would love to partner with your agency to meet your strategy and performance goals.



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Building an Effective Nonprofit Board Checklist for Action Planning

1. Organize around Mission, Vision, Change, Leverage, & Scale:	
<p>Our board organizes its activities and priorities around the vision and mission of our agency. All board members have a shared understanding of the theory of change, leverage and scale we use to meet our mission.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/> We're Doing Great <input type="checkbox"/> Could Do More <input type="checkbox"/> Should be a Priority
<p>Idea Starters</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Review or develop a social impact model, logic model or other visual representation of the way the agency works. <input type="checkbox"/> Facilitate a scenario planning exercise to test the durability of the model. <input type="checkbox"/> Research and present case studies of similar organizations across the country. 	
2. Focus on the Strategic:	
<p>Our board engages in strategic planning, evaluation planning, and resource development planning that serve as the strategy core for a board. These plans are routinely referenced and we measure progress against the plans and adapt our strategies to emergent opportunities.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/> We're Doing Great <input type="checkbox"/> Could Do More <input type="checkbox"/> Should be a Priority
<p>Idea Starters</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Review existing strategy documents and assess the need for additional planning. <input type="checkbox"/> Create an outcome measures and performance benchmarks to monitor progress on plans <input type="checkbox"/> Develop a strategy screen that can be used to manage opportunities. <input type="checkbox"/> Host a strategic board retreat to create energy for strategic planning. 	

3. Develop Organizational Depth:

Beyond attending board meetings and fundraising events, all board members are increasing their understanding our programs, services, operations and organizational culture.

- We're Doing Great
- Could Do More
- Should be a Priority

Idea Starters

- Create opportunities for job shadowing or observing programs.
- Develop short-term and/or high-value volunteer projects designed for board members.
- Host informal board staff "happy hour" mixer events hosted on a regular basis.
- Establish short-term mentoring of board members by agency staff.
- Ensure that board members receive copies of all progress reports submitted to funders.

4. Create a Strong Board Chair - Executive Director Relationship:

Our board chair and executive director have a strong and productive working relationship that strengthens our organization.

- We're Doing Great
- Could Do More
- Should be a Priority

Idea Starters

- Board chair & executive director have a regularly scheduled meeting time not connected to the board operations.
- Board chair & executive director have a formal process to share contacts, information and resources relevant to the organization.
- Board chair & executive director work periodically assess their relationship and convey results to the larger board.
- Board chair & executive director work with an executive coach.

5. Develop Understanding of Nonprofit Management

Our board members are increasing their understanding of how nonprofit, philanthropy and government agencies work and how they operate together as an ecosystem.

- We're Doing Great
- Could Do More
- Should be a Priority

Idea Starters

- Provide access to webinars, print & web resources like the Chronicle of Philanthropy, Nonprofit Quarterly, Stanford Social Innovation Review, Government sources, Nonprofit Risk Management Center & BoardSource.
- Host a nonprofit, philanthropy and government awareness event in collaboration with other agencies.
- Incorporate training & education into Board meetings.
- Host study sessions for all board members.
- Sponsor board members attendance at local or regional nonprofit trainings

6. Establish a Strong Advisory Network:

Our board has assembled a strong network of volunteer advisors, paid service providers, consultants, and peer colleagues in the community to provide operational and programs support to help us stay on the leading edge of management and service.

- We're Doing Great
- Could Do More
- Should be a Priority

Idea Starters

- Develop a clear advisory committee to periodically review strategy, performance measures and provide structured recommendations for improvements.
- Establish formal long-term relationships with outside advisors to support core areas of operation such as finance, human resources, information technology, fundraising and strategic planning.
- Maintain membership in nonprofit professional associations.
- Ensure that the ED has opportunities to network with colleagues.
- Support the executive director in work with an executive coach.

7. Build the Board Intentionally:	
Our board regularly assesses the composition to ensure that there is board guidance for our agency’s operations, programs and services, resource development, fundraising and civic reach. Every new board member position filled represents a strategic addition to expand the capacity of our board.	<input type="checkbox"/> We’re Doing Great <input type="checkbox"/> Could Do More <input type="checkbox"/> Should be a Priority
<p>Idea Starters</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Self-Assess our board composition (sample in Appendix A). <input type="checkbox"/> Develop customized and tailored job descriptions for each board position. <input type="checkbox"/> Host a strategic board retreat to create a board effectiveness improvement plan. <input type="checkbox"/> Periodically shadow board meetings of other organizations. 	

8. Foster Effective Board Operations:	
Our board has a strong decision-making framework, efficient board meetings, effective use of executive committee and subcommittees, current by-laws (that are followed) and an annual evaluation process for the board and the executive director.	<input type="checkbox"/> We’re Doing Great <input type="checkbox"/> Could Do More <input type="checkbox"/> Should be a Priority
<p>Idea Starters</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Conduct an operational assessment of the board & committees. <input type="checkbox"/> Create a written review process for by-laws. <input type="checkbox"/> Include decision-making framework in board orientation packet. <input type="checkbox"/> Create performance benchmarks by comparing our board practices with other agencies. 	

9. Measure Process:	
Our board routinely monitors a core set of performance metrics related to programs, services and operations; actively discusses progress reports submitted to funding agencies; and routinely shares measurement data and results with donors and the community.	<input type="checkbox"/> We're Doing Great <input type="checkbox"/> Could Do More <input type="checkbox"/> Should be a Priority
<p>Idea Starters</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Develop a performance dashboard for programs, services and operations. <input type="checkbox"/> Create a routine process for sharing progress reports with board. <input type="checkbox"/> Develop a transparency reporting section on our agency's website <input type="checkbox"/> Create a "Performance Monitor" as a named board position who serves on the executive committee. 	

10. Foster a Learning Community Culture:	
Our board fosters a learning community culture where we routinely share resources and information to help the board be more effective and the agency grow. We also build in social time along with the formal work of the board.	<input type="checkbox"/> We're Doing Great <input type="checkbox"/> Could Do More <input type="checkbox"/> Should be a Priority
<p>Idea Starters</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Create a lending library for current resources (see Appendix B). <input type="checkbox"/> Create a routine process for sharing nonprofit resources with board. <input type="checkbox"/> Host study circles or a book club <input type="checkbox"/> Create regular social events and celebrate key accomplishments. 	

Appendix A: Assessing Board Composition

Key Board Member Competencies & Attributes

Board Member 12
Board Member 11
Board Member 10
Board Member 9
Board Member 8
Board Member 7
Board Member 6
Board Member 4
Board Member 3
Board Member 2
Board Member 1

Governance

Experience serving on Nonprofit Boards
Strategic Direction
Active Participation
Reasonable Inquiry
Understands nonprofit regulation, Mission, Vision, Funding models
Executive Director oversight
Documentation & Fiscal Control

Capacity Guidance

Entrepreneurship
Business/Nonprofit Finance
Resource Development Planning
Nonprofit Legal Requirements
Marketing / Public Relations / Communications
Organizational Development
Human Resources / Human Capital
Technology
Operations Management

Content Expertise

[Insert Agency Specific Competency]
[Insert Agency Specific Competency]
[Insert Agency Specific Competency]
[Insert Agency Specific Competency]
[Insert Agency Specific Competency]
Program Evaluation

Civic Reach / Resource Development

Personal Connections
Social Media / Technology
Partnership Development
Volunteer Management
Understanding of Philanthropy
Working with Community Leaders
Creating Partnerships

Appendix B: Key Nonprofit Resources

Essential Online Resources for Boards

- Board Source: <http://www.boardsource.org>
- Nonprofit Risk Management Center: <http://www.nonprofitrisk.org>
- Foundation Center: <http://foundationcenter.org>
- Muttart Foundation Board Development Workbooks: http://www.muttart.org/board_development_workbooks

Essential Journal Subscriptions for Board Members

- Nonprofit Quarterly: <http://www.nonprofitquarterly.org/>
- Stanford Journal of Social Innovation: <http://www.ssireview.org/>
- Chronicle of Philanthropy: <http://philanthropy.com/>
- Governing: <http://www.governing.com>

Essential Books for Board Members

- Brest, P., & Harvey, H. (2008) Money Well Spent. Bloomberg Press.
- Collins, J. (2005) Good to Great and the Social Sectors: A Monograph to Accompany Good to Great. Harper Collins.
- Cruchfield, L. & McLeod Grant, H. (2007) Forces for Good: The Six Practices of High-Impact Nonprofits. Jossey-Bass
- Frumkin, P. (2010). The Essence of Strategic Giving: A Practical Guide for Donors and Fundraisers. University of Chicago Press.
- Raymond, S. (2010) Nonprofit Finance for Hard Times. John Wiley & Sons

Appendix C: Action Plan Template

SMART Objective: (Specific, Measurable, Agreed upon, Results focused, Time bound)

Narrative: What does success look Like?

Budget (If Any) \$_____

Pros and Cons of Outside Help

Pros	Cons
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Timeline

What	Who	When	Milestones



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