



What Makes a GOOD BOARD MEMBER?

While all effective board members understand and meet their basic responsibilities, truly exceptional board members do more. They go beyond the basics and pay attention to *how* they approach board service. These six characteristics build on straightforward board duties and focus on key traits of exceptional board members.



BOARD CHAIRS: CREATE A PARTNERSHIP WITH THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OR CEO.

The partnership between a nonprofit's board chair and CEO is one of the most important elements of a strong board and a successful organization. However, developing this relationship takes work and commitment from both individuals.

The role of chief executive can be lonely, so having a trusted colleague in the board chair is invaluable. A good board chair ensures lines of communication are open and serves as a much-needed sounding board for the CEO.



Don't Do: Board chairs shouldn't shy away from, or overreact to, bad news. A strong board chair-CEO relationship is built on trust. The CEO should be just as comfortable sharing bad news as good.



FOCUS ON LISTENING, NOT JUST PARTICIPATING.

To encourage robust discussion during board meetings, board members must be prepared to listen as well as engage. Exceptional board members are careful not to dominate discussions and ensure that everyone, including quieter board members, have a chance to share their opinions. Additionally, it is important to understand the reasoning behind individuals' comments, even when board members do not agree. After listening carefully to others' views, the board can work together to build consensus.



Don't Do: Avoid creating a homogenous board in which consensus is based solely on similar experiences and opinions. Diversity enhances decision making, so incorporating a number of different perspectives in discussions helps the board arrive at the best result.



UNDERSTAND THE BALANCE BETWEEN GIVING THE CEO AMPLE ROOM TO MANAGE THE ORGANIZATION AND ENSURING THAT ETHICAL STANDARDS ARE MET.

Board members are overseers, not implementers. The chief executive is in charge of managing the day-to-day activities of the organization, and the board should be careful not to micromanage. Instead, board members are responsible for bringing complex, big-picture questions and opportunities to the organization.

However, the board must also ensure adherence to legal standards and ethical norms. Adopting a “hands-off” management approach does not mean that board members can turn a blind eye to ethical improprieties. All board members should be familiar with the organization’s bylaws and understand how best to respond to any ethical issues that might arise.



Don't Do:

When introducing issues or programs for the board

to consider, board members should be careful not to push their personal agendas. The needs of the organization should always come before personal connections and pet projects.



ASK “NAÏVE” QUESTIONS THAT OTHERS WANT TO ASK BUT MAY SHY AWAY FROM.

One of the most important roles of nonprofit board members is to ask questions. The board should constantly assess current and proposed projects to ensure they serve the organization’s mission and are setting the organization up for success.

In addition to bigger picture questions, exceptional board members are not afraid to ask what may seem to some as simple, more straightforward questions as well. Oftentimes, a more nuanced organizational business practice can take time to understand, or a new board member might not be familiar with the organization’s history. Good board members are not afraid to ask naïve questions because they trust their own instincts and want to improve their knowledge of the organization.



Don't Do: While asking questions is beneficial, board members must be prepared for rigorous discourse by reading all the materials provided to them during new board member orientation and in advance of a board meeting.

Posing a question that has been answered in the materials provided may show a lack of attention or interest.

What are the basic responsibilities of nonprofit boards?

1. Determine mission and purpose. It is the board's responsibility to create and review a statement of mission and purpose that articulates the organization's goals, means, and primary constituents served.
2. Select the chief executive. Boards must reach consensus on the chief executive's responsibilities and undertake a careful search to find the most qualified individual for the position.
3. Support and evaluate the chief executive. The board should ensure that the chief executive has the moral and professional support he or she needs to further the goals of the organization.
4. Ensure effective planning. Boards must actively participate in an overall planning process and assist in implementing and monitoring the plan's goals.
5. Monitor, and strengthen programs and services. The board's responsibility is to determine which programs are consistent with the organization's mission and monitor their effectiveness.
6. Ensure adequate financial resources. One of the board's foremost responsibilities is to secure adequate resources for the organization to fulfill its mission.
7. Protect assets and provide proper financial oversight. The board must assist in developing the annual budget and ensuring that proper financial controls are in place.
8. Build a competent board. All boards have a responsibility to articulate prerequisites for candidates, orient new members, and periodically and comprehensively evaluate their own performance.
9. Ensure legal and ethical integrity. The board is ultimately responsible for adherence to legal standards and ethical norms.
10. Enhance the organization's public standing. The board should clearly articulate the organization's mission, accomplishments, and goals to the public and garner support from the community.

What are the legal responsibilities of nonprofit boards?

Under well-established principles of nonprofit corporation law, a board member must meet certain standards of conduct and attention in carrying out his or her responsibilities to the organization. Several states have statutes adopting some variation of these duties which would be used in court to determine whether a board member acted improperly. These standards are usually

described as the duty of care, the duty of loyalty and the duty of obedience.

Duty of Care

The duty of care describes the level of competence that is expected of a board member, and is commonly expressed as the duty of "care that an ordinarily prudent person would exercise in a like position and under similar circumstances." This means that a board member owes the duty to exercise reasonable care when he or she makes a decision as a steward of the organization.

Duty of Loyalty

The duty of loyalty is a standard of faithfulness; a board member must give undivided allegiance when making decisions affecting the organization. This means that a board member can never use information obtained as a member for personal gain, but must act in the best interests of the organization.

Duty of Obedience

The duty of obedience requires board members to be faithful to the organization's mission. They are not permitted to act in a way that is inconsistent with the central goals of the organization. A basis for this rule lies in the public's trust that the organization will manage donated funds to fulfill the organization's mission.

What are the responsibilities of individual board members?

- Attend all board and committee meetings and functions, such as special events.
- Be informed about the organization's mission, services, policies, and programs.
- Review agenda and supporting materials prior to board and committee meetings.
- Serve on committees or task forces and offer to take on special assignments.
- Make a personal financial contribution to the organization.
- Inform others about the organization.
- Suggest possible nominees to the board who can make significant contributions to the work of the board and the organization.
- Keep up-to-date on developments in the organization's field.
- Follow conflict-of-interest and confidentiality policies.
- Refrain from making special requests of the staff.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD BOARD MEMBER?



SERVE AS AMBASSADORS FOR THEIR ORGANIZATIONS AND UNDERSTAND THE RESPONSIBILITY THAT COMES WITH THAT ROLE.

As ambassadors, board members represent the board outside the boardroom. This can range from talking with colleagues and friends about the good work the organization does to attending meetings with legislators. Board members serve as a link between the organization and its members, stakeholders, constituents, and clients and are responsible for educating influencers and the community about the importance of the organization's work. For more information on board members' roles as advocates, visit [the Stand for Your Mission campaign](#).



Don't Do: While it is important to discuss the organization's work outside of the boardroom, board members must be careful not to gossip about confidential matters. No matter how informal the situation might seem, internal matters of the organization should remain just that – internal.



Above all else, good board members enjoy their role. They are passionate about the work of the organization and interested in learning more about its mission and the community served. Board meetings should not be seen as a chore; instead, they can help board members connect with their peers and maintain enthusiasm for their important responsibilities.

REMAIN ENERGETIC IN LEARNING ABOUT AND HELPING THE ORGANIZATION.



Don't Do: Be wary of board members who have lost their excitement for board service. Occasionally, fatigued or irritable board members are a sign of problems with the staff or board processes, but a lack of enthusiasm might also mean it is time for certain members to roll off the board.

Adapted from a featured speech at the 2007 BoardSource Leadership Forum by Susan V. Berresford, then president and CEO, Ford Foundation.

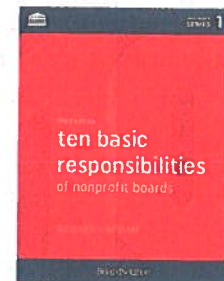


HELPFUL RESOURCES



[Board Fundamentals](#)

[Culture of Inquiry](#)



[Ten Basic Responsibilities of Nonprofit Boards](#)

[The Board Chair Handbook](#)