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Doing Well at Doing Good

The Boardable Guide to Good
Board Membership



Doing well at doing good

There's more to serving on a nonprofit board than taking meeting minutes, planning fundraisers, and showing up at galas. The work of being on a board can be demanding and unpredictable—and that makes being a productive board member a real challenge.

That challenge is complicated by the fact that there's no single way to be a good board member. In fact, the beauty of serving on a board is that you can find your own way toward success. Still, the question remains: Where should you start?

While it's up to you to find your board membership style, you can rely on a set of best practices that successful board members share. This guide will help you discover ways to get and stay engaged, develop your voice in the decision-making process, and understand why your impact as a board member can effect change beyond your role.

FOUR EXPECTATIONS OF AN EXCEPTIONAL BOARD MEMBER

We all know that serving on a board is a serious time commitment, no matter how often it meets. Board members sign up to become advocates of an organization's cause, to use their own skill sets and influence to advance its goals, and to invest time and resources into helping carry out the organization's mission. And while success can look different for every board member, there are four major traits for productive board members:

1. **They are eager to get engaged with the board, and to stay engaged.**
2. **They search for opportunities to lead within the board.**
3. **They actively advocate for the organization outside of board meetings and events.**
4. **They contribute to the organization's funding, either directly or through fundraising efforts.**

That's a tall order, especially for board members with more than one appointment. But being an engaged member, being a change agent, and committing to advocacy will set you up to be a valuable part of the organization's success.

TERMS OF ENGAGEMENT

Both new board members and veterans serving on several boards at once know that staying engaged is a key element of being a productive board member. And engagement is a real and constant concern: A recent Stanford University study showed that the majority of its respondents didn't believe their fellow board members were very experienced or engaged. The report states that over a quarter (27%) of nonprofit directors do not believe that their fellow board members have a strong understanding of the mission and strategy of their organization. A third (32%) are not satisfied with the board's ability to evaluate the performance of the organization.

Here's a simple goal with a simple solution: Work to discover the best way for you to serve. Start by identifying your board member learning style, and use that to determine how you'll need to receive and respond to information from the board. If you're a visual learner, having a central location for all notes and documents could make things much easier for you. But if your learning style leans toward the auditory, you might benefit from more phone meetings and in-person conversations.

Once you know the best way to learn about the board and your role in it, it's time to dig in. Stay curious, and discover how you can use your skill set to improve a part of the board's decision-making process. The Leading with Intent report by BoardSource revealed that a strong understanding of a program is connected to stronger engagement and external leadership. Ask the questions that will help you become more informed and show you where you can make the most impact. The more you know, the better you'll do. Here are a few ways to do just that:



Being an engaged board member will set you up to be a valuable part of the organization's success



01

Lift Your Voice



“**Finding your voice can influence how your board communicates – don’t be afraid to get creative**”

Whether it’s a nonprofit that meets monthly or a corporate board that only meets quarterly, boards want to know that their work is productive and meaningful. And as an individual board member, you have the power to make a real difference.

A result of learning how to leverage your skill set is taking on leadership roles where you can. That can mean using your project management skills to help manage volunteers, leaning in with your finance skills to help with fundraising metrics, or using copywriting skills to create compelling social media content. Make your mark, and use your own experience to speak with authority about subjects you know well. Being willing to lead isn’t just a way to make a board more efficient; it’s also good governance.

Finding your voice can also influence how your board communicates—so don’t be afraid to get creative with how you contribute. Finding new ways to engage donors is important, but so is maintaining board engagement and keeping members accountable. Investing in creative ways to boost engagement is just one way to ensure that you can help get the most out of every board meeting, as well as help guide how each meeting is run.



02

Broaden Your Impact



Even the oldest, most popular nonprofit organizations have to compete for donated dollars and hours. And for every hour-long subcommittee meeting or board strategic planning session, there are a dozen projects and tasks that need to be completed. There's just no way around it: Board members must amplify their efforts to maximize their impact, which is easier said than done. Alarming, Stanford University's study reports that over a third (36%) of nonprofit boards never evaluate their own performance.

The good news is that today's technology landscape is full of solutions to help board members accelerate outreach, target potential donors and volunteers, share success stories, and demonstrate results. Investing a little extra time and more resources can deliver a significant ROI.

Being a brand advocate can take many forms such as social media engagement, volunteering for board events, or doing outreach during professional events. The key is being consistent in your messaging and in spending time to ensure the message you're sending aligns with the organization's larger mission. A subcommittee dedicated to helping board members become brand advocates on social media, for

instance, is just one way to help amplify your own voice while enabling your fellow board members to do the same.

Brand advocacy also provides an opportunity for you to engage external audiences about your organization without soliciting monetary support. For many nonprofit organizations, brand awareness is a real challenge—especially when marketing budgets are slim.

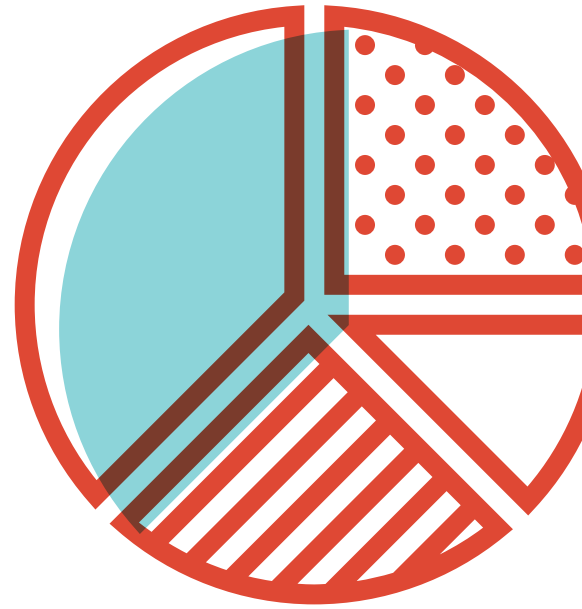
But perhaps the most important way to help advance an organization's mission is to show the results of its efforts. Even as donors demand to see measurable proof of a nonprofit's efforts, a recent study from McKinsey reveals that just 40% of nonprofit directors and executives play an active role in that work.

Finally: don't underestimate your contribution to a board's results. One way to be a brand advocate is to share how you've grown in your role as a board member. Share your own story of board membership, your personal contributions to the board's mission, and how other advocates like you can get involved. The impact you have can go beyond what a donation could do.



03

Contribute to the Bottom Line



It's a board member's duty to tap into their strong associations and relationships to make a positive impact

Last but not least, it's critical for board members to directly contribute to the board's funding, or raise outside support through fundraising efforts. Typically, board members have strong associations and relationships that they are able to tap into, and it's their duty to the board to make a positive impact not just on the board's mission, but on its bottom line.

This makes commitment to results an imperative. Whether you play a role in helping board leadership raise the necessary funds, delivering reports, or leading the project yourself, highlighting an organization's efforts makes it easier to communicate with target audiences. If your board is already delivering quarterly or annual reports, find ways to help promote those reports and share them when you can.



Next steps

Now that you've got an idea of how to become an active and productive board member, it's time to start a plan of action for yourself. The checklist below will help you determine how you prefer to interact with your fellow board members, discover where your strengths on a board might lie, and lay out a plan to increase your own productivity as a board member.

KNOW YOUR COMMUNICATION STYLE

This is one of the first questions you should ask yourself before joining a board. Being a board member means having to wade through lots of emails, meeting minutes, documents, and schedules. Make it clear how your own communication style aligns with the way the board runs. Adjust your style as necessary and, when appropriate, offer concrete ways for the board to improve its communications processes.

IDENTIFY YOUR SUPERPOWER

Communications, data science, finance, or community outreach—no matter your area of expertise, you can use it to become a better board member. Use your talent to offer ideas and deliver value in your own unique way.

COMMIT TO THE MISSION

A good board member attends all meetings, responds to all messages, and shows up for all events. A great board member finds a way to incorporate her board's mission into as many interactions as she can. Brand advocacy is one of the most important resources an organization has, so be generous with your ability to advocate.

SHOW YOUR WORK

Providing clear proof of results is just one way to deliver value—both to the board you serve and to the donors who provide their time and resources to your organization. Work with board leadership to ensure that the message of your organization's efforts is heard far and wide.

Every successful board is made up of individuals who, when working together, deliver much more than the sum of their parts. And when every board member can perform her duties to the best of her abilities, then the entire organization benefits. Learning to be a good board member is a continuous journey, and the best board members are happy to travel that path.

Final checklist



As a board member, are you as engaged as you want to be? Ask yourself the questions on this checklist to identify ways you can enrich your board service. Better yet, take it to your next board meeting, and share it with your fellow board members to start a conversation about areas for improvement.

DO I HAVE A MENTOR ON THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS, OR AM I A MENTOR TO OTHERS?

Nonprofit engagement experts recommend pairing new and seasoned board members for mentoring. Not only do they each learn about being a better board member, their discussions can lead to important points to bring to their cohorts during meetings.

DO I KNOW HOW TO TALK ABOUT THE MISSION?

Much as you would for work, it is important to have a brief “elevator pitch” about your nonprofit experience and the mission ready at all times. Practice it out loud, until you feel you could tell someone exactly why you’re involved in a sentence or two.

AM I ACQUAINTED WITH KEY STAFF MEMBERS?

Board members should be careful to not be too chummy with nonprofit staff, in order to avoid the urge for staff to skip the CEO. However, you should know the key people who affect parts of the mission you are most involved in. Schedule a coffee or phone call to stay in touch.

DO I INTRODUCE NEW PEOPLE TO THE ORGANIZATION?

Outside of fundraising networking, you should be constantly aware of bringing new people into committees, volunteer roles, programming, and grooming future board members. A good goal is: Plan to replace yourself on the board one day with someone more valuable than you are.

AM I OVERLOOKING AREAS WHERE I CAN CONTRIBUTE?

You know your own skills and fundraising goals, but you might be missing the other ways you can help. Periodically ask your CEO what their top five needs are at that moment. It could be that they need a piece of equipment or service that you can source, that you never would’ve known to offer.



About Boardable

Built by Nonprofit leaders, for Nonprofits. Boardable empowers you to work more effectively with your boards and committees. We know the frustration you feel (and the hours you lose) just from organizing a meeting via email, phone, and text. We've lived it. We're from the nonprofit world, too. After looking around for the right tool but not finding it, we decided to build it. Boardable is a software platform that centralizes all communication between you and your board. Find the best meeting times, securely store all of your documents, archive discussion threads and more—all in one place.

For more information, to schedule a demo, or to sign up for your FREE 14-day trial, visit us at boardable.com.



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