



**Serving on a  
Nonprofit Board  
*Training Resources***



## Serving on a Nonprofit Board: *Training Resources*

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# WHAT IS A NONPROFIT?

## A Form of Organization

A “nonprofit corporation” is an organization incorporated under state law to carry out any lawful purpose not involving pecuniary profit or gain for its directors, officers, shareholders, or members (MCL450.2108(2)). A nonprofit *can* make a profit; however, the profit cannot be distributed to an ownership or governing body (e.g., shareholders). Rather than focusing on enhancing shareholder value, as does the for-profit corporation and board, a nonprofit corporation and its board must focus on achieving its mission.

## Special Tax Status

Nonprofit corporations may be entitled to various federal, state, and local tax exemption or special treatment. Under federal tax law, a nonprofit may be classified as tax exempt by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) but such classification is not automatic. The IRS will classify tax-exempt nonprofits under section 501(c) of the Internal Revenue Code. Most charitable organizations will be classified under 501(c)(3), which allows for tax exemption and the ability to receive tax-deductible donations.

	<b>For-Profit Corporation</b>	<b>Nonprofit Corporation</b>
<b>Purpose</b>	Provides goods and/or services that the public demands in order to make a profit. Profits are distributed to shareholders or put back into the business for expansion.	Provides services that the public needs and can generate a profit for an organization, but must use profit to further operations. Nonprofits cannot distribute profit to shareholders.
<b>Primary Beneficiaries</b>	Shareholders/Owners	Recipients of services
<b>Public Accountability</b>	Disclosure levels set by law; varies depending upon public or private ownership of entity	Disclosure levels set by law; Because of public funding, public accountability is high on both a formal and informal basis
<b>Board Composition</b>	People at the top of their field; high level of business expertise generally required; often paid	Wide-ranging background and levels of expertise regarding governance; usually unpaid volunteers who are motivated by a desire to serve

## HOW IS A NONPROFIT GOVERNED?

By law, nonprofit organizations must have a governing body known as the board of directors or trustees. The Michigan Nonprofit Corporation Act (MCL 450.2501) provides that the business and affairs of a nonprofit corporation shall be managed by its board (except as otherwise provided by the Act).

The level of activity and engagement required when managing the organization will vary depending upon the life cycle and stage of the organization and board:

<p><b>Type of Board:</b> Organizing Board (often a “founding” board). In the idea or start-up stage.</p>	<p><b>Relationship to Staff:</b> Board may be “hands-on” during start-up; little or no staff at first. Might seek to hire an Executive Director.</p>
<p><i>Transition to a governing board might be prompted by overworked board members, desire to increase scope or size of the nonprofit, sudden absence of a strong founder. The transition might be characterized by financial problems, struggle to establish clear roles and board and staff, and new board members with less personal connection to the founder or founding board members.</i></p>	
<p><b>Type of Board:</b> Governing Board. In growth stage.</p>	<p><b>Relationship to Staff:</b> Board/staff relations are better balanced. Leadership is shared and Committees organize the board’s work.</p>
<p><i>Transition to a mature governing board might be characterized by greater dependence on the board for fundraising, seeking members who have community influence, and the presence and growth of committees, which become more independent of the full board.</i></p>	
<p><b>Type of Board:</b> Governing Board. In a mature stage.</p>	<p><b>Relationship to Staff:</b> Staff is large, well trained and requires little oversight from the board.</p>

# DUTIES OF A NONPROFIT BOARD MEMBER

There are three fundamental legal duties that all board members must follow. These three duties, commonly known as fiduciary duties, apply to everything that the board of directors does. Board members must keep these duties in mind when making decisions or taking action for the nonprofit. If they fail to do so, they could be held liable for any negative consequences of their actions.

## Duty of Care

The duty of care is often defined as “the amount of care that an ordinarily prudent person would exercise in a like position and under similar circumstances.” In everyday terms, this means that a board member must exercise reasonable care when he or she makes a decision for the nonprofit.

In order to meet the reasonable care standard, board members must take an active and informed role in decision-making. They should be sure to attend board meetings on a regular basis, and be actively involved in those meetings.

## Duty of Loyalty

All directors owe a duty of loyalty to the organization. The duty of loyalty requires a board member to keep the best interests of the organization in mind at all times when making decisions on the behalf of the organization. A board member must never put personal priorities or opportunities ahead of the organization’s interests. To comply with the duty of loyalty, boards members must be sure that they are acting with the organization’s interests in mind, not their own.

## Duty of Obedience

The duty of obedience requires board members to be faithful to the organization’s mission. Their actions must be consistent with the organization’s mission statement, Articles of Incorporation, bylaws, and tax-exemption documentation. The nonprofit’s central goals must guide all board decisions. In addition, board members must also comply with all applicable laws and regulations.

Often, a fourth duty is referenced in nonprofit board literature. The *duty of confidentiality* requires that individual board members keep all board discussions and decisions confidential until, if ever, the board determines it appropriate for the information to leave the boardroom. Nonprofits subject to state Open Meeting Act provisions may be required to disclose board meeting activity (legal counsel can assist in determining applicability).

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# COMMON BOARD COMMITTEES

Nonprofit boards frequently rely on committees to improve their efficiency with ongoing tasks and activities (*standing committees*), and sometimes for temporary issues of significance (*ad hoc committees* or *task forces*). It is important to remember committees offer only information and recommendations to the board – they do not make formal decisions unless specifically granted that power by the full board.

## **Executive Committee**

Executive Committees exist to supplement the work of the entire board and usually consist of the board officers and, often times, the executive director. The bylaws of an organization can allow the Executive Committee to make decisions on behalf of the board in carefully defined circumstances (e.g. an organizational crisis or emergency).

## **Finance Committee**

Finance Committees are called to maintain accurate and complete financial records, including the regular presentation of financial statements to the board. They also preside over budget preparation with help from an appropriate staff representative. If an Audit Committee (see below) does not exist, the Finance Committee should take on those tasks as well.

## **Development Committee**

Development (Fundraising) Committees oversee the process of raising funds and securing resources so the organization can fulfill its mission. It should be noted, however, that the entire board should participate in fundraising for the organization.

## **Governance Committee**

Governance (Nominating) Committees evaluate and suggest improvements for the board's capacity and effectiveness, including the review, recommendation and orientation of new trustees. This committee should also lead the board and leadership development effort.

## **Programs and Services Committee**

Programs and Services Committees exist to offer high-level support and direction for the various programs offered by the organization. It is very important to establish unambiguous goals and authoritative limits for this committee so it does not interfere with the day-to-day operations overseen by the organization's lead executive.

## **Audit Committee**

A new best practice for nonprofits with new governmental regulations forthcoming, the Audit Committee is responsible for conducting an annual external financial audit (including the selection and rotation of the lead auditor), presenting the final audit to the board for approval and ensuring appropriate financial controls are in place. The Audit Committee should have at least one "financial expert", and none of its members should be paid by the organization.

## **Ad Hoc Committees or Task Forces**

When an issue comes up that cannot or should not be managed by an existing standing committee, boards can create an Ad Hoc Committee or Task Force to tackle the issue and report back to the board for approval. This should be a small group of people with a focused assignment, to be disbanded upon completion of their assigned task. Examples include a Capital Campaign Committee or Special Event Task Force.

# THE BOARD'S ROLE IN STRATEGIC PLANNING

Strategic planning is the purposeful forecasting of an organization's future, taking into account community needs, constituent feedback, related external factors and available resources. A good strategic plan will align mission and programming with tangible, time-bound goals for the board and staff. It might also either include or clearly align with fundraising and marketing goals. Below are some of the major components of strategic planning:

## **Conduct a Strategic Analysis**

To create a usable plan for the future, the planners must understand the environment in which the nonprofit currently functions. Is the mission still relevant? Does the community need the services the nonprofit provides? Do the current programs align with the mission or is the nonprofit experiencing "mission drift"? What do constituents and stakeholders say about the organization and its services? Consider conducting a SWOT assessment (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) and/or a full-scale organizational assessment.

## **Realistically Define Available Resources**

While thinking "big" is encouraged, planners must consider the nonprofit's ability to raise funds to enact the plan. Building cost-intensive initiatives into the strategic plan without planning for their funding could lead to disappointment. Consider planning goals in the context of fundraising. Can the board identify avenues to raise the needed funds? Is there a way to generate revenue from services or programs?

## **Develop Strategies, Goals and Objectives**

The board typically leads a strategic planning effort for the organization, often in partnership with the executive director. Involve the voices of staff and constituents as well (evaluation results or focus groups might be a good way to gather input). Create a plan that can be flexible and allows for reasonable adjustments without threatening the organization's health or sustainability. Avoid the status quo and allow the planning process to include creativity, big ideas and a challenging goal, if appropriate.

## **Use the plan!**

When creating a strategic plan, it's important to set tangible, reachable goals that, when accomplished, will signify fulfillment of the plan. Decide how you'll determine success. Devise a way for staff to use the plan in their own annual planning and in goal setting for the executive director.

The board might find it helpful to engage a facilitator to assist with the process of planning. A professional experienced with nonprofit planning can provide structure to the process and help mediate if there is conflict among the planning team. The use of outside support different is for each nonprofit; many can successfully create a high-quality strategic plan without a facilitator's assistance.

## BOARD AND STAFF RELATIONS

The relationship between the board and staff is vital to an organization's effectiveness. This relationship will be different for every organization. Board members for newer, small nonprofits will often handle some day-to-day responsibilities normally required of staff at a more mature organization. Even at organizations aligned at a similar point in their life-cycles will have different needs depending on their circumstances. Although there is no "right" way for the board and staff relationship to be defined, it is imperative the roles in your nonprofit are clear.

In order for this relationship to be successful, both the board and the staff need to follow the parameters set for their relationship. Typically, the organization's lead executive will be the gateway for most board and staff communication. Exceptions exist, particularly in committee work when a staff member is assigned to the committee, but these exceptions should be carefully defined. A danger that exists is the possibility for micromanagement of staff members by the board. Also, grievances taken directly to board members from staff, particularly if they relate to the lead executive, should be redirected appropriately in order to maintain the integrity and trust laid out by board and staff policies.

In general, boards set policies for the organization, including the board and staff relationship, but this does not mean the staff is bereft of policy-making authority. For example, the staff should create day-to-day operational policies separate from the policies of the board. Furthermore, some policies are best formed through collaboration between the board and staff. The following chart illustrates some of the policies boards and staff may wish to create and adopt separately and collaboratively.

<b>Board Created Policies</b>	<b>Collaborative Policies</b>	<b>Staff Created Policies</b>
Mission Statement Conflict of interest policy signed annually by board and staff Board recruitment Code of conduct Board attendance and participation policy Board giving Board self-evaluation Board education Evaluation of the Executive Director	A strategic plan with measurable objectives Financial procedures Investment management Sexual harassment and non-discrimination Gift acceptance Crisis plans Financial management, including a rolling two or three-year financial plan	Hiring, evaluating, supervising and terminating of staff (Executive Director) Utilization of the organization's resources (human, physical, technology, etc) Marketing and publicity Lobbying Employment terms, compensation, and benefits



# THE BOARD'S ROLE IN FUNDRAISING

One of the most important and frequently-asked questions of current and potential board members is, "Do I have to participate in fundraising?" The answer is simply, "Yes!" The board is responsible for the continued funding and financial health of the organization; in practical terms, you are required to give money to AND get money for your organization.

## Following are some practical methods for getting involved in the fundraising process:

- Assist, attend and participate in special events
- Volunteer to help staff stuff letters, label envelopes, etc.
- Send personal thank-yous to donors you know (phone calls, letters, email)
- Attend other community events as a representative of your organization
- Brainstorm potential funders and contacts for the organization (e.g. friends, relatives or colleagues)
- Secure a donation from your company (e.g. event sponsorship)
- Join the executive, board chair and/or development director on "asks"  
LEAD when you're comfortable or if the prospect is someone you know
- Serve on the development committee
- *Make a financial contribution to the extent of your capacity*

## As a board member, you should also keep the following principles in mind:

- One of your roles is to provide oversight for your organization's fundraising efforts and to ensure they are tied to the mission.
- Consider opportunities that would help to prepare and educate yourself on how to make an "ask" (i.e. attend fundraising trainings and seminars).
- Know your organization's case statement inside and out; use it to prepare and practice your "elevator speech".
- *Participate in the aspects of fundraising you are comfortable with, but make the commitment to reach a little farther.*

### ***Things to remember:***

**Don't underestimate the importance of "friend-raising"**

**People give to people**

**Donors only give when asked!**

# COMMON FUNDRAISING TERMS

## **100% Board Participation**

The annual giving of money from every board member to your organization's fundraising program – a best practice encouraged by many grant-giving foundations.

## **Capital Campaign**

A fundraising program designed to raise a specific amount of funds for a specific need over a specific period of time (e.g. a new building).

## **Case Statement**

A prepared statement used in fundraising that describes *what* community need your organization fills, *how* your organization meets the need, *who* your organization is and *why* the donor should contribute.

## **Development**

Refers to all aspects of raising resources for your organization, especially fundraising.

## **Direct Mail / Annual Appeal / Annual Campaign**

Your organization's annual fundraising drive, usually conducted through mass mailings to all stakeholders, aimed at raising funds for yearly operating expenses.

## **Donor Cultivation**

The process of introducing, involving and growing a potential donor's or leader's interest in and support of your organization.

## **Elevator Speech**

A prepared and practiced description of your organization's case statement that can be delivered to an interested party in the time of an elevator ride.

## **Major Gifts**

An aspect of a fundraising program designed to bring in gifts of significant amounts, ideally on an annual basis from long-time donors.

## **Planned Giving**

An aspect of a fundraising program in which your organization provides individual donors the chance to apply personal, financial or estate planning resources as a lifetime gift to your organization.

## **Restricted Funds vs. Unrestricted Funds**

Gifts (usually money) that are accompanied by stipulation in order for the organization to accept and use the money (e.g. earmarked for particular program) vs. Gifts that can be used for whatever an organization deems necessary.

## **The "Ask"**

The meeting between a donor and organization representatives during which the official solicitation is given (i.e. when a gift is actually asked for!).

# THE SARBANES-OXLEY ACT

## What is Sarbanes-Oxley?

The American Competitiveness and Corporate Accountability Act, also known as the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, was signed into law in July 2002. Currently, the federal law applies only to publicly traded companies. Through its various organization, reporting and recordkeeping requirements, it seeks to improve corporate accountability. The Act was passed in response to several accounting scandals in the corporate world that undermined public faith in such institutions and created a demand for financial accountability and sound ethical practices among these institutions.

## Why Should Nonprofits be Concerned?

Similar misdeeds by a tiny fraction of nonprofit corporations have been widely publicized and have shaken public trust in the nonprofit sector. These incidents have drawn the attention of federal and state regulators. Through the state's Attorney General's office, California has enacted the Nonprofit Integrity Act of 2004, containing provisions similar to those found in Sarbanes-Oxley legislation. Similarly, other states have increased their level of scrutiny of nonprofit filings and practices.

In July 2004, the Michigan Senate passed changes to the Charitable Organizations and Solicitations Act. The changes currently await House approval and include annual registration fees, auditing requirements and more increased provisions for vendors and fundraisers who conduct contract work with nonprofits. Additionally, the IRS and the Senate Finance Committee are currently reviewing recommendations of nonprofit "best practices" for nonprofit boards that would set forth a variety of activities that would ensure better oversight.

## What Should Your Nonprofit Do Today?

Although the Act does not apply to nonprofits, there is national momentum behind adoption of "best practices" that would provide assurance of proper oversight by nonprofits. A survey of various resources finds the following are recommended:

- Adoption and compliance with a **Conflict of Interest** policy
- Adoption and compliance with a **Code of Ethics**
- Adoption and compliance with **Whistle Blower Protection** policy
- **Audit Committee** (for smaller nonprofits, Finance Committee w/ outside financial expertise) and Auditor Independence (mandatory rotation)
- Adoption and compliance with **Document Destruction** policy
- Restriction against loans to Executives and Board members

## For More Information:

Independent Sector, <http://www.independentsector.org/>  
Senate Finance Committee, <http://finance.senate.gov/>  
Michigan Attorney General's Office, <http://www.michigan.gov/ag/>  
BoardSource, <http://boardsource.org>  
MNA Public Policy, <http://mnaonline.org/policymakers.asp>

The information provided here is intended as introductory information only. Please consult your attorney for questions specific to your organization.

# BOARD LIABILITY

Generally, individuals on nonprofit corporation boards will not be held liable for the activities of the organization's staff, unless he or she has breached any of the duties required of board members (duties of care, loyalty or obedience). One may be held responsible if he or she has participated in board actions or taken actions individually that violate the law. Directors, acting as officers, may be held separately responsible for individual wrongful acts.

When assessing the risk associated with exposure to personal liability, consider whether or not your nonprofit organization offers you protection against such liability. Protection is derived from the following sources:

1. Federal and some state laws allow nonprofit organizations to limit the liability of their volunteer directors. A nonprofit corporation must state in its articles of incorporation that it so limits liability. The law also allows assumption of liability by the corporation. There are exclusions from these allowances (generally, limitations or assumption are not invoked if bad faith or breach of duties are involved).
2. The Michigan Nonprofit Corporation Act allows for nonprofit organizations to indemnify its volunteer directors against certain liability. Organizations usually include an indemnification policy in their bylaws. The indemnification will be worthless if the organization does not have the financial means to back up its promise to pay. Accordingly, you should determine whether the organization has the financial resources to indemnify if needed. Such resources may be in the form of insurance (typically referred to as "Directors' and Officers' Insurance" or "D&O").

The threat of a lawsuit should not prevent you from serving on a board. There are several measures that good organizations and good board members can employ to reduce risk. They include:

- Practicing proper oversight in accordance with nonprofit "best practices"
- Attending all board meetings; a pattern of absence can actually increase individual liability because it makes it more difficult to prove that the board member was adhering to the duties of care, loyalty and obedience.
- Actively participating in discussions, asking questions and registering objections in the meeting minutes, if necessary.

Remember, directors may be at more risk for taking no action as opposed to taking the wrong action for the right reasons.

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# THE BOARD'S ROLE IN AMBASSADORSHIP

Nonprofits need board members not only for their oversight role, but to speak out on behalf of the organization. The role of ambassador is the only one that is fulfilled almost exclusively outside the boardroom. Below is a simple guide for fulfilling this critical role.

## **Always... be a vocal advocate for the nonprofit and the services it provides:**

- Share the nonprofit's values and mission with those who are unfamiliar with it.
- Share success stories with others to make a clear connection between the nonprofit's mission and community outcomes.
- Thank funders for their support of your nonprofit.
- Participate in events hosted by the nonprofit or related to its mission.
- Advocate for the nonprofit sector in general, sharing with others the nature of nonprofits and their need for community support.
- Maintain a united front – in the midst of organizational change or growth, during a transition or after a controversial board meeting.

## **As needed... spread a positive message about the nonprofit:**

- Write letters to the editor or special articles.
- Participate in press conferences, speaking engagements and community forums; talk about the mission to leadership groups and potential funders or board members.
- Ensure successful encounters with constituents by introducing yourself and thanking them for working with or supporting your nonprofit.

## **In an emergency or when something goes wrong... be proactive and as open as possible:**

- Send any reporters to the previously designated spokesperson (typically the board chair or executive director).
- Use pre-prepared "talking points" that focus on the mission of the organization and its positive impact on the community.
- Bring issues to the attention of the full board and stakeholders with a personal phone call before they read it in the evening newspaper.

# RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

## **The Best of the Board Café**

Masaoka, Jan – Published by Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, 2003. Offers ideas, information, opinion and resources to help board members get the most out of their service. Find articles from the e-newsletter formatted as handouts to be easily shared for discussion.

## **The Board Building Cycle**

Hughes, Sandra R., Berit M. Lakey, and Marla J. Bobowick – Published by Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, 2000. A step-by-step guide to developing a board that includes sections on board commitment, involvement, and education.

## **Boards that Love Fundraising: A How-to Guide for Your Board**

Zimmerman, Robert M. and Ann W. Lehman – Published by Jossey-Bass, 2004. Inspirational stories are accompanied by practical advice and many interactive exercises for boards based on the authors' extensive experience in training and working with boards of directors of all sizes.

## **Field Guide to Developing and Operating Your Nonprofit Board of Directors**

McNamara, Carter – Published by Authenticity Consulting, 2002. This guide is very useful to start a Board or to fix a struggling Board. Guidelines are written in an easy-to-implement style, resulting in a highly practical resource that can be referenced at any time during the life of a nonprofit.

## **The Governance Series**

Published by BoardSource, 2003  
Includes the following texts:

- 1. Ten Basic Responsibilities of Nonprofit Boards**
- 2. Financial Responsibilities of Nonprofit Boards**
- 3. Structures and Practices of Nonprofit Boards**
- 4. Fundraising Responsibilities of Nonprofit Boards**
- 5. Legal Responsibilities of Nonprofit Boards**
- 6. The Nonprofit Board's Role in Setting and Advancing Mission**
- 7. The Nonprofit Board's Role in Planning and Evaluation**
- 8. How to Help Your Board Govern More and Manage Less**
- 9. Leadership Roles in Nonprofit Governance**

## **Transformational Boards: A Practical Guide to Engaging Your Board and Embracing Change**

Tweeton, Byron L. – Published by Jossey-Bass, 2002. Respond to changes and trends in your organization as well as the external environment, all while preserving your mission. Offers a flexible framework for engaging your board in a process that can support ongoing change.

### **Transforming Board Structure: Strategies for Committees and Task Forces**

Bobowick, Marla J., Sandra Hughes and Berit Lakey – Published by BoardSource, 2001. BoardSource's governance consultants provide a fresh look at committees and illustrate how boards can use work groups to streamline the work of the full board.

### **Trustee Handbook: A Guide to Effective Governance for Independent School Boards, 8th ed.**

DeKuyper, Mary Hundley – Published by National Association of Independent Schools, 2003. Provides a detailed overview of all board roles and responsibilities. Includes case studies and sample forms. Helpful for all boards, not just school boards.

### **The Ultimate Board Member's Book: A 1-hour Guide to Understanding and Fulfilling Your Role and Responsibilities**

Grace, Kay Sprinkel – Published by Emerson & Church, 2004. Become the board member your organization needs. Learn roles and responsibilities, how boards work, time commitments, role of staff, committee service, and more.

## **ONLINE RESOURCES**

### **Board Café**

[www.boardcafe.org](http://www.boardcafe.org) – A free online newsletter for nonprofit boards that covers timely nonprofit governance issues and topics. Touted as a resource that is “short enough to read over a cup of coffee.”

### **BoardSource**

[www.boardsource.org](http://www.boardsource.org) – A national organization that provides individualized consulting and training services to nonprofit boards.

### **The Free Management Library's Toolkit for Boards**

[www.managementhelp.org/boards](http://www.managementhelp.org/boards) – A comprehensive set of links to articles and advice about board topics.

### **Independent Sector**

[www.independentsector.org](http://www.independentsector.org) – Independent Sector is a national membership organization that focuses on strengthening the nonprofit sector through advocacy efforts.

### **The Internet Nonprofit's Center Board of Directors FAQs**

[www.nonprofits.org/npofaq](http://www.nonprofits.org/npofaq) – The Internet Nonprofit Center provides information “for and about nonprofits.” This link will send you directly to a comprehensive nonprofit board FAQ section.

### **Michigan Nonprofit Association (MNA)**

[www.mnaonline.org](http://www.mnaonline.org) – MNA is a statewide membership organization that focuses on advancing the awareness and effectiveness of Michigan's nonprofit sector. The website offers information on upcoming trainings, membership services and advocacy.

### **ResourceConnect**

[www.new.org/resourceconnect](http://www.new.org/resourceconnect) – ResourceConnect is a regularly updated listing of over 700 service providers, web resources, and print resources that benefit nonprofit organizations in Washtenaw County, Michigan and surrounding areas.