Board Engagement

Bringing on a terrific board member is only the first step. Taking time to ensure that each board member becomes personally invested and engaged in the mission of the organization is time well spent. When truly engaged, board members will become your nonprofit's best ambassadors, advocates, strategists, and all around supporters.

An engaged board is a forward-thinking board that strives to have a collaborative partnership with the CEO/executive director, which means partnering for fundraising, as well as policy-making. Engaged boards "work" between board meetings, and attend meetings well prepared. They are willing to deliberate candidly, confidently treading on sensitive topics that may result in "messy" discussions because they trust one another and are comfortable with the culture of the nonprofit, confident that everyone values mutual respect.

> The new engagement is distinguished by board deliberations that are future-oriented, proactive, and based on trust. To fulfill their obligations to provide effective oversight of the institutions they are charged with guiding and protecting, governing boards need to be willing to take calculated risks, including challenging assumptions, testing traditional ways of doing business, and introducing innovative ideas.

- Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges

Practice Pointers

- Assign new board members a "board buddy" to serve as a mentor for the first few meetings: offering a ride to the meeting, greeting them at the door, and sitting next the new board member can made a big difference in "first impressions."
- Use name tags at meetings so that new board members can get to know their colleagues easily.
- Include a bio of all the other board members in the board orientation materials and if there is a statement of values or code of conduct that the nonprofit has adopted, be sure to share that also.
- Help new board members get "up to speed" by sharing minutes from the prior year's board meetings, highlighting any important corporate action taken. However, rather than expecting them to read the materials, sitting down with a few of their colleagues who are willing to summarize the past year's activities is more personal and can start building bonds.
- Host a special gathering that is purely social – creating personal connections and fostering trust and respect will bolster the board's ability to have candid conversations and make tough decisions.
- Finding the right committee for the new board member can be helpful to ensure early engagement. Some people join boards to share their professional expertise with the nonprofit. Others want to do something completely different as a volunteer from what they do in their everyday job.
- Structure board meeting agendas around important questions that the nonprofit needs to answer and strategic priorities so that the board is continually being asked to think about the future and see the "big picture." One of our favorite ideas is to divide the agenda into three sections to stimulate thinking: "hindsight, foresight, and insight."
- Board members feel more engaged when they are confident they know both the mission and what it takes to advance it. Cultivate advocacy for the mission by asking at each board meeting, "*What have you done since the last board meeting to advance the mission of the nonprofit*?" Share the *Stand For Your Mission* discussion guide [1] with your board.
- Asking all board members to fill-out a self-assessment [2] periodically is the best way to gauge engagement.
- Hold a discussion with your board to talk about their role as advocates. Using the StandForYourMission Discussion Guide [3] (BoardSource)
- Revisit your mission: As time goes on, nonprofits should revisit their mission statement to ensure that their activities are still consistent with the mission – and that the mission has kept up-to-date with the direction of the organization. Mission Possible: Improving your organization's mission statement. [4] (Nonprofit Coordinating Committee of New York)

Resources

- Ideas for discussions [5] that will engage your board from the Maine Association of Nonprofits
- What to do with board members who don't do anything [6] (Blue Avocado)
- The Changing Landscape of Trustee and Board Engagement [7] (Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges)
- Nonprofit Board and Leadership Development Strategies [8] (Nonprofit Quarterly)
- Thoughts about "board member contracts [9]" (Blue Avocado)
- Great board meetings take time to plan, but the rewards of sending out a great board packet will bring you immediate ROI! What should go in the "board packet [10]?"(Blue Avocado)
- Board engagement – How to enhance it [11] by posing the right questions (CreationInCommon)
- Maximizing Board Engagement and Effectiveness [12] (Streamlink Software)

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[6] http://www.blueavocado.org/content/what-do-board-members-who-dont-do-anything
[7] http://agb.org/trusteeship/2010/julyaugust/changing-landscape-trustee-and-board-engagement
[8] http://info.nonprofitquarterly.org/free-download-board-stories-for-nonprofits?
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7c07-43c5-abbd-791fd8289ba6|5089277c-3d80-49ee-86d4-b94b251ee824
[9] http://www.compasspoint.org/board-cafe/board-member-contract
[10] http://www.blueavocado.org/node/581
[11] http://www.creationincommon.com/board-engagement-learn-how-to-change-the-question/
[12] http://www.streamlinksoftware.com/maximize-board-engagement
[13] https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/tools-resources-categories/boards-and-governance
[14] https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/tools-resources-tags/board-of-directors
[15] https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/tools-resources-tags/board-roles
[16] https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/tools-resources-tags/engagement