

Board Evaluation: Where to start

A strongly functioning board is essential to the sound governance and long-term sustainability of your organization, but how do you determine the strength of your board? How do you know whether the board is living up to its potential — or needs a tune-up? And what can *you* do to help it grow stronger?

We'll limit ourselves to just three important aspects of board evaluation, here: policies, an active Governance Committee, and board training.


1) If you want your board to succeed, your board members must first define success! Does your organization have written job descriptions for your board and each of its committees? Do you have clear written policies in place regarding the makeup and role of your board — policies your board has voted to adopt and maintain? If you don't have these things in place already, this is an important place to start as you build your board evaluation process. As you develop these materials, consider engaging more experienced board members to help. They may be helpful in raising your board's sights when it comes to attendance, philanthropy and/or board self-evaluation, for example.

2) Your Governance Committee can champion effective board evaluation. The Governance Committee is responsible for developing an appropriate evaluation process and mechanisms, and for conducting regular and meaningful board evaluation. Some of the questions your organization might ask include: Do we have the expertise we need on our board? What benchmarks will our board use to evaluate its performance? When will our board evaluation take place? What actions will be taken if our board or any of its members are not meeting established performance goals?

Your Governance Committee can also help your board score an A (so to speak) on its evaluation, by:

- Helping to ensure a steady supply of strong, engaged board members: Are there any areas of expertise you need to add to your board, for example? Who are the best candidates? (Ideally, your Governance Committee maintains a record of promising candidates to meet future need.)
- Helping establish appropriate governance policies (and updating them as needed): This goes beyond the creation of evaluation-related policies and procedures to include all other aspects of governance for your organization.

Don't have a Governance Committee? That means you have an additional opportunity to engage key board members in important work at your organization! After all, GuideStar® calls this “the most important committee of your nonprofit leadership.” (GuideStar's tips for strengthening your Governance Committee — along with some simple recommendations related to board evaluation — can be found at



<https://www.guidestar.org/Articles.aspx?path=/rxa/news/articles/2012/need-to-improve-a-governance-committee.aspx>.)

3) Training at the top. Many organizations provide stellar training for their staff, but forget that their board members can also benefit from professional development. And this shouldn't merely be limited to an initial orientation process. Whether you're updating board members about policies that impact your work, or strengthening their advocacy skills, or helping them become more successful fundraisers, for example, an investment in board skills and knowledge is an investment in your organization's overall success. That's a win-win.

In [*Enhance Attrition or Thank and Release? Firing Lousy Board Members*](#), Simone Joyaux provides suggestions on how to identify and "release" non-performing board members. First, though, it's important for you and your board to identify what level of performance you want and need, to provide an appropriate level of board training and development, and to establish an evaluation process that tells your board and its members how they're measuring up.

We'd be pleased to help you with your board development and/or board evaluation needs. You can contact us at hello@thurlowassociates.com.

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Creating the board you always dreamed of

Have you already created your board wish list? If not, we recommend that you do so! First, consider what skills or resources you currently lack (or have in excess). What would the *ideal* mix of board skills look like, in order to provide the best governance, leadership and resources to your organization? Don't forget to engage your board in thinking about this!

Once you've determined what you need, you're ready to develop an action plan to target and cultivate prospective board members with the appropriate skills, talents, resources and other characteristics.

Using a customizable board matrix, we help clients assess their current board make-up and plan for the future. Please e-mail us at hello@thurlowassociates.com for more information.