

Governance Brief

A DARC quarterly piece on nonprofit boards

CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL BOARD DEVELOPMENT

How to Build a More Effective Board

The skills and practices of high-performing boards serve as examples for other boards to consider. While not every practice may be transferable, boards that want to improve their effectiveness can draw selectively upon the lessons offered by their high-performing counterparts and adapt them locally.

Ambiguous expectations of boards, weak accountability, unclear returns on the investments of time for development, and discomforts over giving up familiar patterns and practicing new ones all serve as obstacles to improving board performance. Overcoming these barriers requires the board's concerted and sustained attention. For these efforts to be successful, several prerequisites must be in place.

Board development cannot be imposed on board members or the chief executive. In order for improvement to take place, a board must be ready for change and accept the importance of attending to and improving its own performance. The chief executive, the board chairperson, and a substantial number of board leaders must want to work on improving board performance. These leaders must initiate the process with enthusiasm and clear commitment to working with the board to bring about changes.

Efforts to improve performance must be integrated with the board's regular business. Learning to work together more effectively cannot be accomplished in a one-time session or retreat- learning must be embedded in the board's regular work. By looking at the board's tasks and identifying ways the group can work better and produce more useful results, the board simultaneously learns and applies its new techniques. While a retreat approach is often useful in getting started, development activities should be built into the board's ongoing agenda and ways of doing business. Most board members are motivated to improve the way the board functions primarily so that the board is better equipped to enhance the organization's performance. Board development framed as a means to improve overall organizational performance, rather than merely the performance of the board, is often met with greater enthusiasm.

Changing a board's behaviour is easier than changing attitudes or personalities. Exhortations and prescriptions do not work nearly as well as changes in routines, procedures, or structures for doing work together. Board members begin to think differently and act differently as a result of such practical steps as bringing thoughtful questions to the board, providing relevant and focused information, dividing members into small groups to brainstorm alternative solutions and formulate recommendations, and encouraging critical and analytical thinking about issues before the group.

The best approaches link process and substance. For example, asking the board to set goals for itself or to formulate indicators to monitor its performance sets in motion a process that builds cohesion and educates participants, while also generating substantive products.

Board development is an extensive, long-term process, not a quick-fix. The effort to improve board performance is never complete. In order to sustain the process, the board needs members who serve as champions. The pressures to revert to business as usual may become overwhelming if continued attention is not given to board performance and responding to the changing organization or environment.

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