
How Does Your Board Measure Up?

By STEPHANIE ROTH

Want a quick and simple way to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of your board? The chart that follows is a useful tool for identifying areas where your board's structure and functioning may need improvement.

There is no magic formula to a high-functioning board, and you do not necessarily have serious problems if your board is not structured or organized as the items on this chart suggest. Nevertheless, the exercise of completing this chart as part of a larger board evaluation process can be extremely useful in determining areas that most need attention, development, and/or reorganization. The scoring gives you a way to place your board on a scale that ranges from most to least effective.

Keep in mind that boards change when the board members themselves are clear about the need to do so. More real progress results when board members can see for themselves how they measure up than when they are told by the executive director or an outside consultant. This chart is a guide by which your board can decide for itself what needs to change.

Remember too that board members are volunteers, with busy lives apart from the time they serve on the board. Progress may be slow, but as long as it is steady, you will experience positive outcomes.

The work of developing a board is ongoing for the life of your organization. Though you will face different challenges at different stages, there is never a point at which you will have a "perfect" board. Like relationships, families, and communities, the board is a part of an evolving and changing organism. With luck, the challenges will not overwhelm or discourage you, but provide keys to new ways of moving forward.

Using the Chart

1. Schedule a board meeting at which you can focus the entire meeting on the process, or make it part of a longer board retreat.
2. Distribute a copy of the chart to each board member to fill out so that everyone has the opportunity to express their opinion about how the board is functioning.
3. Use the group's responses as a guide to the areas it most wants to work on now. If more than a couple of areas need attention, choose the top two or three that can be the focus of the board's work for the next six months. There will always be things that need improvement; you will make more progress biting off smaller rather than larger pieces at one time.

(Please see chart on next page.)

How Does Your Board Measure Up?

Rate your board using the following scale:

0—No, this doesn't exist on our board

1—We're working on it

2—Yes, we're in great shape on this item

| A. SELECTION & COMPOSITION | RATING |
|---|---------------|
| 1. The board is composed of persons vitally interested in the work of the organization. | |
| 2. The board is representative of its constituency with regard to race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. | |
| 3. There is a balance of new and experienced board members to guarantee both continuity and new thinking. | |
| 4. Board members have the combination of skills (e.g. fundraising, management, legal, fiscal, etc.) necessary to carry out their work. | |
| 5. There is a limit to the number of consecutive terms a member can serve on the board. (No life terms!) | |
| 6. The organization has a pool of potential board members identified for the future. | |
| 7. The organization develops future board members through the use of volunteers on committees. | |
| 8. New board members are recruited and selected using a thorough review process. | |
| SUBTOTAL | |
| B. ORIENTATION & TRAINING | |
| 9. There is a statement of agreement outlining the duties and responsibilities of board members that all board members sign. | |
| 10. The board understands its legal liability. | |
| 11. The organization provides an orientation for new board members. | |
| 12. The organization supplies a board manual to all board members that includes, but is not limited to, descriptions of current programs, a list of board members, budget and funding information, by-laws, and personnel policies. | |
| 13. The organization makes training opportunities available for board members to increase skills related to their board responsibilities. | |
| SUBTOTAL | |
| C. STRUCTURE & ORGANIZATION OF THE BOARD | |
| 14. The board has a simple, concise set of by-laws that describes the duties of board members and officers, as well as the procedures by which the board conducts its business. | |
| 15. The board has a mechanism (such as an executive committee) for handling matters that must be addressed between meetings. | |
| 16. The board elects a chairperson (or cochairs) to provide leadership and coordinate the ongoing work of the board and its committees. | |
| 17. The board has active committees (e.g., fundraising, personnel, nominating, long-range planning) with specific assignments and responsibilities. | |
| 18. Committee assignments are reviewed and evaluated periodically. | |
| 19. Working relations between the board chairperson(s) and the executive director are strong and productive. | |
| 20. Board and staff members are clear about their respective duties and responsibilities. | |
| 21. Working relations between the staff and board are characterized by mutual respect and rapport. | |
| SUBTOTAL | |

| D. THE BOARD AT WORK | RATING |
|--|--------|
| 22. There are regularly scheduled board meetings at least four times a year. | |
| 23. Meetings begin and end on time as per agreed-upon schedule. | |
| 24. There is adequate preparation and distribution of material, including agendas, study documents, etc., in advance of board meetings. | |
| 25. Board meetings are characterized by open discussion, creative thinking, and active participation together. | |
| 26. Board meetings deal primarily with policy formulation; program, financial, and long-range planning; financial review; and evaluating the work of the organization. | |
| 27. Minutes of board and committee meetings are written and circulated to the members. | |
| 28. Committees are active and complete assigned tasks in a timely manner. | |
| 29. The board is aware of matters of community, state, and nationwide concern within the field of service of the organization. | |
| 30. Individual members of the board accept and carry out assignments within the area of their talents and expertise. | |
| 31. Board members follow through on their commitments in a timely manner. | |
| 32. Board members make a generous financial contribution (self-defined) to the organization on an annual basis. | |
| 33. All board members are involved in some aspect of fundraising for the organization. | |
| 34. The board conducts an annual review of its own organization and work. | |
| 35. New leadership is emerging consistently from the board and its committees. | |
| SUBTOTAL | |

ADD UP YOUR TOTAL SCORE

If your score is

58–70: You're in great shape. You have a healthy board with good working relationships. You should consider sharing some of your secrets with the rest of us! (One of your secrets is that you realize that the work of developing an effective board is a lifelong process.)

46–57: You're on the way to a strong, effective board; pay attention to your weak spots, and involve the entire board in developing solutions.

30–45: You have lots of room for improvement. The board needs to prioritize areas to work on—both in the short and long term—make a plan, and work the plan!

Under 30: You're probably experiencing problems already. Now is the time to devote serious attention to ways to strengthen the structure, composition, and functioning of the board. If not, your programs, and ultimately the entire organization, will suffer.