

## Board Development

The Board of Directors of not-for-profit (non-governmental) organizations defines the purpose of the organization, sets priorities and direction for the activities of the organization, evaluates outcomes and ensures the financial health of the organization. The best Boards understand and embody the values and mission of the organization and hold the vision for the future work of the organization.

### Quality in Practice

Board development starts with participation – who is on the Board of Directors? Board membership should be diverse, including:

- people served by the organization and their allies
- community members from all sectors of community
- individuals with skills and expertise in finance, law, marketing, public relations or other areas of importance to the work

There should be a Nominating (or Board Development) Committee that works year round to seek out Board members who embody the experiences, knowledge, expertise and connections the Board desires.

Members of the Committee continually explore and make connections in the community to explain the organization and to find people with the heart for the work. The Committee is seeking people who, when they hear about the work of the organization, are willing to “get up off the couch and act.”

Board members need information and training on how to fulfill their fiduciary responsibilities. This comprises the technical aspects of Board work. Community resources for this type of training include: universities and colleges, associations for non-profits whose purpose is to support the development and growth of other non-profit organizations, and local accounting firms.

The Board should put into place a structure to ensure that the **fiduciary** responsibilities of the Board are attended to, such as Committees for Budget and Finance, Audit Committee and/or Program Evaluation.

The Board of Directors should engage in planning to figure out what is most important to the organization and to develop a practical vision for three to five years into the future. Some call this strategic planning. It should be a facilitated process and involve staff and constituents, as well as Board members.

The **strategic** direction of the organization should be envisioned in broad strokes and not define specific objectives or commitment of resources. The Board and staff need to know where they are going, but also need the flexibility to change the specific outcomes they are seeking and the ways to reach those outcomes as they continually learn more about the organization and the environment in which they work.

One of the most important roles of the Board of Directors is developing the capacity to be generative.

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## *Board Development (continued)*

The **generative** role of the Board of Directors is characterized by reflecting on the actions of the organization and learning to make sense of what happened. Generative thinking should produce new meaning for the future of the organization. Working generatively, requires Boards to see the situation from the whole and seek to understand how the work of the organization is woven into the fabric of community life.

This approach moves Boards from scarcity thinking (how can our organization get more of already scarce resources and have a bigger share of the pie) to abundance thinking (how can our organization share and use resources in a way that maximizes our contribution to the life of the community). Working generatively, a Board of Directors can see emergent strategies that will become important to the organization and community in the future.

The Board of Directors engages in work at the boundaries of the organization in order to learn and see what is driving the organization. This can be done by:

- participating in organizational activities with people receiving services
- spending time with staff in the field
- talking with constituents of the organization
- being actively involved in many aspects of community life

Board members ask deep, probing questions to discover the source of the mission and programs of the organization. These questions explore where the organization's ideas come from, what the intentions of individual Board members are and how this shapes the organization.

To learn more about the generative role of the Board, see the book *Governance as Leadership* by Richard P. Chait, William P. Ryan and Barbara E. Taylor.

Another good resource is BoardSource  
[www.boardsource.org](http://www.boardsource.org)