



## Planning for nonprofits and philanthropy

# What Makes Good Boards Good?

## Role of the Board



# What does it mean to be a good board?

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**Fact: Nonprofit boards are facing increased scrutiny by state regulators and by accrediting bodies.**

**It's time to get serious about the role that governing boards play in the life of the nonprofits they've been entrusted to serve.**

- **Good boards are attuned to the concerns of regulators and accreditors.** Good boards are also attuned to the nonprofit's mission and play a key role in determining its vision for the future. So the first two questions a good board should ask are: 1) are we compliant with regulations and requirements? And 2) do we have clarity and unity on mission and vision?
- **Good boards have good board members.** Trustees or directors are active and engaged. They attend meetings, contribute meaningfully, make appropriate connections and fulfill other clear obligations that enrich the nonprofit consistent with its mission and vision.
- **Good boards have good meetings.** They start and end on time. They are artfully led. They encourage discussion and debate fed by information that is timely, focused and thorough.
- **Good boards are served by good committees.** The real work of the board is done in a few effective committees that meet regularly. Detailed discussions on policy, budget, capital expenditures, governance and executive issues happen here first.
- **Good boards have good communications.** Civil discourse in person, transparent and regular communications between meetings, and periodic opportunities for casual interaction in social settings make it much easier to get the job done.

# What does it mean to be a good board member?



Here's a simple primer on being a good board member.

- **Attend as many meetings as you can.** Showing up means you matter. Absence undercuts your agency.
- **Support the organization,** financially, to the best of your ability and at every opportunity. Skin in the game amplifies your voice at the table.
- **Be prepared.** Read materials in advance. Develop well-considered questions to move the dialogue forward in a board discussion.
- **Inform yourself.** Visit your organization, institution or agency periodically to see it in action. Sign up for blogs and publications relevant to your nonprofit as well as those on good governance. Knowledge is power.
- **Don't let operations tempt you.** The board's role is governance. Getting into programming, management and operations may come naturally to you. But leave that to the professionals... and live vicariously through their successes and failures.

<b>Name of Member:</b>	<u>John Smith</u>
<b>Board Term:</b>	<u>2013-2014</u>
<b>Committee Assignments:</b>	Development (Chair)
<b>2014 Board Gift:</b>	\$5,000
<b>2014 "Get"</b>	\$10,000
<b>Fundraising Prospects:</b>	Matching gift from Corporation; Jane Doe
<b>Other Support:</b>	Host small cultivation event for 5-8 individuals Recruit new Advisory Board prospect
<b>Notes:</b>	
<b>SIGNED:</b> _____	<b>DATE:</b> _____

*Sample Annual Trustee Work Plan*

# What's it take to be a good leader?

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**Effective leadership starts with running a good meeting. Here's a simple check list for good chairing:**

- **Begin with praise.** Open every meeting with kudos to board members for personal, professional and nonprofit-related accomplishments. Do the same for key staff. Everyone likes to be recognized. Doling out praise is a powerful thing.
- **Use talking points.** A script or list of talking points ensures you won't miss a key message over the course of a meeting. If someone else says it first, so much the better.
- **Manage a balanced conversation.** Toggle back and forth between positions and points of view so the board hears a balanced debate on issues. Encourage quieter voices to rise by calling on those who might be more hesitant to speak.
- **Be clear about timing.** When conversation becomes vociferous, look at your watch and state a time by which you'll end discussion. There's a law of diminishing returns in extended board discussions; votes are unlikely to change after an initial period of debate is completed.
- **Be last to speak.** The chair's voice can be the loudest, and it may silence those reluctant to differ. So save it up for summary, which is a great time to put your position forward.
- **Always conclude with "to dos."** Keep a list as the meeting progresses and repeat or make assignments as your wrap up. You reinforce your role in oversight and leave no room for next-steps uncertainty.

# What makes good meetings good?

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**Board members will show up to meetings that are substantive and where their presence makes a difference. Here's a primer on making a good meeting:**

- **Three key ingredients.** Every board member should leave every meeting with a feeling that a) there was some substantive discussion to which s/he contributed, b) there was a vote that required his/her presence, and c) s/he learned something stimulating to pass along at a party.
- **Advance materials.** Staff should transmit a complete set of board materials in advance including a timed agenda and brief (!) backgrounders in preparation for discussion and decision. No one should complain: "This is the first I'm hearing of it!"
- **Choreograph.** Put your agenda items in a carefully curated order that gets everyone talking early on. Initiate the most important debate within 30 to 45 minutes. By then, stragglers have arrived, attention is most focused, and meeting fatigue is still a half hour away.
- **Employ written reports.** Use written reports (even from the CEO) for anything not requiring discussion or open to questions. Nothing deadens a meeting more than a string of verbal reports that don't require action.
- **Find reason to celebrate!** Feeling good about staff, fellow Board members and organizational achievements is one of the joys of voluntary leadership. Use celebration to strengthen cohesion.

# Steps to a high-functioning board

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What do you let slide in an over-packed weekly schedule? Your trustee obligation will be the last thing you scuttle if you feel you're part of a high-functioning board. Here's a primer for high function:

- **Let committees do the work.** Well-composed committees (four to five members each) should do the core business of the board, including budget review, audit, investment, governance, executive oversight and fundraising. Committees meet, then report and recommend action to the full board.
- **Staff the board.** Make it easy for board members to focus on substance by providing staff support. Meeting preparation, logistics, issues research, meeting notes, and board reports are all staff jobs.
- **Inform regularly.** Scheduled communications from the CEO to the board should be frequent and pithy. A monthly update (never more than a page) can make board members feel like insiders. Updates also guard against claims of ignorance about new programs, initiatives, grants, citations, etc.
- **Track performance.** Board members uphold their obligations more when they've agreed to a personal annual performance plan, and receive a tracking report each year.
- **Make time to socialize.** Get board members and spouses/partners together periodically to develop an ease and familiarity between them. Examples: receptions, travel programs, group lunches, celebratory dinners and recognition events.
- **Retreat!** An annual off-site planning session is useful for setting and re-setting board/staff relations and the institutional agenda. Retreats should also be used by the board to set its own annual goals, away from the press of regular business.

# How do good boards get built?

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**Some good boards come together by luck. Most good boards are intentional. Here's a primer on building a good board, intentionally.**

- **Be strategic.** Start by listing areas of expertise needed on your board, from legal and financial, to marketing and merchandising, to architecture and real estate, and more. Then list the social and geographic circles important to your fundraising and advocacy. Match your current board membership to your needs and then work to fill the gaps.
- **Clarify obligations up front.** A job description for board members sets roles and responsibilities at the get-go: meeting attendance, program participation, financial obligation, committee service and other basics of good governance should be spelled out, and applied consistently “across the board.”
- **Provide an orientation.** Be rigorous in orientating new board members. Tour facilities, introduce constituents, schedule sit-down time with key staff, and review your nonprofit's financials thoroughly.
- **Reward good behavior.** Praise board members regularly, publicly and in print, to recognize and reinforce behaviors important to your nonprofit's success. Everyone likes a pat on the back. Good behavior can be contagious.
- **Groom leadership.** Make committee assignments and select committee chairs with an eye toward their leadership potential as officers. Assigning a promising board members to lead a temporary task force is a great way to test potential.
- **Review performance.** Sit down with each board member annually and ask them to make a commitment of time, money and action. A report card or gentler self-evaluation form at the end of each year helps clarify what's expected and gives each board member an opportunity to succeed.



# About Us

## Plan A Advisors

**Plan A** was founded in 2013 by Evan Kingsley and Adam Gaynor as a new kind of **consulting** practice to design and facilitate **highly individualized** approaches to the unique needs of clients, their audiences, leadership, and financial and organizational platforms.

Together they have more than **40 years of experience** in nonprofits, social enterprises, philanthropy and organizational development across the **widest range** of organizations, institutions and philanthropies.

Plan A works with the **board and executive leadership** of agencies, institutions, organizations and funders to design the most **effective and efficient paths** to setting and meeting **realizable goals**, driven by a **strong and compelling vision**.

Plan A projects include **strategic and business planning, governance, mergers and fundraising**.



Ready to set an introductory meeting? Please get in touch. We welcome your inquiry and take great pride and pleasure in guiding you and your organization to the right solution for your needs.

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