

## The Four Ws (and an H) of Board Self-Assessment

Considering a board self-assessment? Here's what you need to know.

There are no perfect boards, yet, *Leading with Intent: 2021 BoardSource Index of Nonprofit Board Practices*, finds "a relationship between board self-assessment practices and ratings of board performance. In fact, executives with boards that regularly assess themselves (in the past 2 years) also rate their boards higher across all areas of board performance than those that assess themselves less frequently and even more highly than those that have never assessed their own performance."

Before beginning an assessment, however, it is essential to fully understand the process. This resource outlines the four Ws (and the H) of board self-assessment: the Why, When, Who, How, and What.

### WHY

Board self-assessments are tools designed to surface a board's strengths and weaknesses. They provide an opportunity for the board to learn about itself, celebrate what it does well, and address those areas in need of improvement.

Other benefits of board self-assessment include:

- providing an outline of overall board performance and progress towards strategic goals
- reminding board members of their individual and collective responsibilities
- identifying any disparities among board members in terms of their roles and responsibilities
- strengthening the board's team-building skills
- increasing the board's accountability
- providing opportunities for the board to set goals for future performance

## WHEN

The optimum frequency for scheduling a board self-assessment is every two to three years. This allows the board to review and discuss its assessment results, develop a board development plan to address its challenges, implement changes, and then reassess to determine where further improvement might be required. Board development should be an ongoing effort that is informed by regular assessment.

When planning for assessment, keep in mind that there are times when it is particularly beneficial, such as

- early stages of an organization's lifecycle, especially after hiring the first staff
- anytime there is confusion about board versus staff responsibilities



**BoardSource Recommended Governance Practice: Board Evaluation.** The board can conduct a comprehensive self-assessment approximately every two years to evaluate its own performance. Only through structured self-reflection can board members judge their own collective performance and understand the extent of their individual responsibilities.

- prior to and after changes in leadership (either on the board or with the chief executive)
- in connection with strategic planning

## WHO

Before beginning an assessment, organizational leaders should understand the unique roles they play in the process.

### Governance Committee

- Oversees assessment process
- Takes the lead in selecting an assessment tool and implementing the process
- Reviews results with the full board and takes the lead in creating and implementing a board development plan to address challenge areas
- Ensures assessments take place regularly to track progress

### Board Chair

- Willingly engages in the assessment process and encourages others to do so
- Respects the governance committee's oversight role
- Shows initiative in adopting recommendations from the assessment

### Chief Executive

- Stays informed about the assessment process
- If asked by the governance committee, completes an assessment survey to provide their unique perspective on the board's performance

#### Using an outside consultant

While the governance committee is ultimately responsible for managing the assessment and board development process, it may be helpful to work with a governance consultant to facilitate the process and provide increased confidentiality and neutrality. The consultant can also summarize feedback, facilitate the

- Reviews assessment results and encourages — and assists where possible — the board in using assessment results to improve performance

board's discussion of the results, and suggest fresh ideas to strengthen the board's performance.

## HOW

### ***Before the assessment***

Preparing in advance for an assessment is one of the most important factors in ensuring a successful outcome.

- *Be cognizant of preconceived attitudes toward assessment.*  
Some board members think of performance assessment as a threatening exercise. They may be resistant to change or wary of having their performance scrutinized. Work to ensure full board commitment as early as possible — focus on the positive outcomes of assessment, emphasizing that the process is designed to improve the board's effectiveness, not punish anyone for poor performance.
- *Understand the purpose of the assessment.*  
Allow for an open board discussion to address questions or hesitations about the process. Consider talking with other boards that have successfully completed an assessment to learn more about their approach and how it benefitted the organization.
- *Discuss the process in advance.*  
Provide any necessary materials or information about the chosen assessment tool, including a timeline with key dates highlighted. Ensure board members are prepared to complete all necessary steps on time.

### **The assessment process**

All assessments are different, but the basic process is outlined below.

1. The board determines which assessment tool to use.

2. All board members complete the assessment survey.
  - Most boards elect to keep responses anonymous, either through the assessment platform or by using an outside consultant to facilitate the survey.
3. Responses are compiled in a detailed, accurate, and digestible report for the board to review.
4. The full board meets to discuss the report and consider next steps, either at an extended board meeting or a retreat.

## WHAT

### **What to assess**

The topics covered in your assessment will depend upon the tool your board chooses to use. Select an assessment that best meets the needs of your board while providing a comprehensive view of its overall performance. Potential topics include

- board composition, committees, and structure and process
- diversity, equity, and board culture
- board process, operations and meetings
- roles and responsibilities
- understanding of organization's mission and programs
- establishment of strategic direction
- organization's financial strategy and board members' contributions to fundraising
- recruitment and orientation
- relationship with the chief executive

### **What not to assess**

While some of the items below may be assessed at a later date, they should not be included in a board self-assessment.

- the organization's performance
- the chief executive's performance

- individual board members' work

## WHAT'S NEXT?

Once the board completes the assessment survey, it should schedule an extended meeting or retreat to discuss the results and develop goals for addressing any areas that have been raised as opportunities for improvement and celebrate success. If applicable, an outside facilitator can assist in creating an action plan for the board to follow.

At board meetings, the board can periodically review progress toward goals to ensure meaningful changes are being made. All board members are responsible for considering their individual roles as they relate to the assessment findings and working to improve their work along with the board's overall performance.

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**Resources:** *BoardSource Recommended Board Practices; Board Self-Assessment; Leading with Intent*