

What makes an engaged board member?

While all effective board members understand and meet their basic responsibilities, truly exceptional board members do more. They go beyond the basics and pay attention to how they approach board service. These six characteristics build on straightforward board duties and focus on key traits of engaged board members.

What is a Board Member?

Every year, millions of people contribute their time and expertise to help shape the future of nonprofit organizations by serving on boards. These board members govern organizations by setting strategy, providing oversight, and securing resources to drive nonprofit success and build stronger communities. For many, board service is a meaningful way to create positive change and champion a cause they deeply care about.

Find out more about [how to serve on a nonprofit board](#).

What do Board Members do? (Roles + Responsibilities)

Clarity around board member roles and responsibilities is essential for advancing the organization's mission and collective purpose. While boards tend to perform well in fundamental areas such as understanding the mission and providing financial oversight, they often fall short in external functions like fundraising, advocacy, community-building, and strategy setting. Increasing awareness of the full scope of board responsibilities can help boards operate more effectively and reach their full potential.

Find out more about how nonprofit [board members fulfill their roles and responsibilities](#).

What makes an engaged board member?

#1 – Focus on sense-making and collective purpose as well as strategy, oversight, and resources

In addition to focusing on strategy, oversight, and protecting resources, board members must also make sense of the information they receive and understand the ecosystem in which their organization operates; only then can they advance the organization's mission and collective purpose.

Caution: Avoid creating a governing board that is detached from the work of the organization. Authorized voice and power coupled with an equity lens, choosing purpose over organization, and respect for the ecosystem work together to ensure [purpose-driven board leadership](#)

#2 – Focus on listening, not just participating

To encourage robust discussion during board meetings, board members must be prepared to listen and engage. Exceptional board members are careful not to dominate discussions and ensure that everyone, including quieter board members, has a chance to share their opinions. Additionally, it is important to understand the reasoning behind individuals' comments, even when board members do not agree. After listening carefully to others' views, the board can work together to build consensus.

Caution: Avoid creating a homogenous board in which consensus is based solely on similar experiences and opinions. Diversity enhances decision-making, so incorporating

a number of different perspectives in discussions helps the board arrive at the best result.

#3 – Understand the balance between giving the CEO ample room to manage the organization and ensuring that leadership expectations are met

Board members are overseers, not implementers. The chief executive is in charge of managing the day-to-day activities of the organization, and the board should be careful not to **micromanage**. Instead, board members are responsible for bringing complex, big-picture questions and opportunities to the organization.

However, the board must also ensure adherence to community expectations, legal standards and ethical norms. Adopting a “hands-off” management approach does not mean that board members can ignore improprieties. All board members should be familiar with the organization’s policies and understand how best to respond to any issue that might arise.

Caution: When introducing issues or ideas for the board to consider, board members should be careful not to push their personal agendas. The needs of the organization should always come before personal connections and pet projects.

#4 – Ask “naive” questions that others want to ask but may shy away from

One of the most important roles of nonprofit board members is to ask questions. The board should regularly assess current and proposed projects to ensure they serve the organization’s mission and set the organization up for success.

In addition to bigger picture questions, exceptional board members are not afraid to ask what may seem to some as simple, more straightforward questions as well. Oftentimes, a more nuanced organizational business practice can take time to understand, or a new board member might not be familiar with the organization’s history. Engaged board members are not afraid to ask naïve questions because they trust their own instincts and want to improve their knowledge of the organization.

Caution: While asking questions is beneficial, board members must be prepared for rigorous discussion by reading all the materials provided to them. Posing a question that has been answered in the materials provided may show a lack of attention or interest.

#5 – Serve as Ambassadors for their organizations and understand the responsibility that comes with that role.

As ambassadors, board members represent the board outside the boardroom. This can range from talking with colleagues and friends about the good work the organization does to attending meetings with legislators.

Board members serve as a link between the organization and its members, stakeholders, constituents, and clients and are responsible for educating influencers and the community about the importance of the organization's work.

Caution: It is important to remember that individual board members do not speak for the organization.

For more information on board members' roles as advocates, visit the [Stand for Your Mission campaign](#).

#6 – Remain energetic in learning about and helping the organization

Above all else, engaged board members enjoy their role. They are passionate about the work of the organization and interested in learning more about its mission and the community served.

Caution: Be wary of board members who have lost their enthusiasm for board service. Occasionally, fatigued or irritable board members are a sign of problems with the staff or board processes, but a lack of engagement might also mean it is time for certain members to roll off the board.

What are some examples of the roles and responsibilities for Board Members?

Setting direction and strategy, securing resources, and providing oversight are examples of basic roles and responsibilities. Check out our [checklist of board roles and responsibilities](#).

How do you structure board committees?

The most common standing board committees are finance, executive, fundraising, and governance. Read our resource on [structuring board committees](#) to find guidance on ways to maximize board committees and when to forego them.

101 Resource | Last updated: May 16, 2025