**Identify and Build a Healthy Nonprofit Board**

In the dynamic landscape of nonprofit management, the efficacy of a board can significantly influence an organization's success and resilience. Board members play a crucial role in governance, strategic planning, and resource allocation. However, there are occasions when some members may not fulfill their roles effectively due to various reasons, including lack of time, skills mismatch, or waning passion. In such cases, facilitating a respectful transition for these members can make way for fresh energy and new perspectives. Here's how to approach this delicate process with empathy and professionalism.

## 1. Planning for Effective Action – A Strategic Plan

How many board members and what skills should they possess that are necessary to achieve your strategic objectives? To ascertain this, your organization's vision, goals, and strategies must be explicitly defined, ideally within a 3-5-year strategic framework.

This strategic plan should outline your future direction, key performance metrics, identified gaps, and the roles of the board and staff in bridging these gaps.

## 2. Establish Clear Expectations and Assessments

Setting clear expectations from the outset can prevent many problems down the line. Regular assessments of board members' contributions, conducted in a supportive and constructive manner, can help in identifying performance gaps early. These assessments should be aligned with the board member's job descriptions and the organization's strategic goals.

Honestly and respectfully addressing any arising issues can encourage self-reflection among board members about their continued fit for their roles.

**Resource:** Board Member Self-Evaluation

## 3. Ensuring a Diverse Board of Directors

Which mix of professional expertise and personal backgrounds will best advance your mission?

Despite many organizations aspiring to have a diverse board, defining what diversity means in practice can be challenging. A strategically diverse board should reflect the community served and bring a range of professional skills and leadership experiences. Consider the demographic, skills, and leadership traits that are most valuable to your organization's mission.

Diversity enhances the board's ability to understand the community, foster creativity, access new resources, and make well-rounded decisions.

## 4. Balancing Board Size and Efficiency

While larger nonprofits may opt for a bigger board, effectiveness does not linearly correlate with size. Historical and recent research suggests that smaller, more manageable teams often operate more efficiently. Aiming for a balanced, capable team is more beneficial than merely increasing numbers.[[1]](#footnote-1)

What is the optimal number of board members to ensure organizational resilience? Review the composition of your board, especially key officer positions crucial for ongoing leadership and succession planning. Assess whether your board has enough depth to mentor future leaders and whether there are sufficient members to avoid operational crises in the event of unexpected departures.

Consider the risk of non-compliance with minimum board member requirements and the board's capacity to fill interim leadership positions in emergencies. Additionally, check your state’s rules as they may have minimum requirements.

## 5. Prioritizing Quality over Quantity in Recruitment (Board Evaluation & Blueprint template to ID skills/qualifications)

In assembling your board, focus on individuals' mission alignment, availability for board duties, and the diverse skills and experiences they bring. This holistic approach ensures your board is not only compliant and functional but also positioned for strategic success and long-term viability.

As a general guideline, many small to medium-sized nonprofits operate effectively with boards comprising 7 to 15 members. However, some larger organizations have boards that are significantly larger to accommodate broader representation and expertise.

Ultimately, the key is to ensure the board is neither too large to be manageable nor too small to carry out its duties effectively. Regularly reviewing the organization's needs and the board's composition is important to ensure it remains fit for purposes as the nonprofit grows and evolves.

The board's composition should then be assessed to ensure there are enough members to cover all necessary functions without overburdening individuals.

## 6. Cultivate an Environment of Open Communication

Create an atmosphere where feedback is routinely shared and received positively. Encouraging open dialogues about board members' experiences, challenges, and levels of satisfaction can foster a culture of transparency. In such an environment, discussing the possibility of resigning becomes a natural part of ensuring the board's vitality and effectiveness, rather than a taboo or punitive measure.

## 7. Offer Support and Alternative Ways to Contribute

Sometimes, board members may struggle due to external pressures or changes in personal circumstances. Offering support and potentially different ways to contribute can be beneficial. Perhaps a shift to a less demanding role or involvement in specific projects rather than strategic planning could reinvigorate their contribution without necessitating a resignation.

## 8. Initiate the Conversation with Sensitivity

When it becomes clear that a board member's resignation is in the best interest of the organization, initiating this conversation requires tact and empathy. Encouraging ineffective board members to resign is a delicate process that, when handled with care, can lead to positive outcomes for both the individual and the organization. It opens up opportunities for new talents to step in, bringing fresh perspectives and energy vital for the nonprofit's growth and adaptation to changing environments. By approaching the situation with empathy, professionalism, and a focus on the organization's mission, you can facilitate a smooth transition that respects the contributions of outgoing members while paving the way for future successes.

Focus on the organization's needs and future direction rather than personal shortcomings. Acknowledge their contributions and express gratitude for their service. It's also important to highlight that making room for new members with different skills or perspectives is a natural evolution in the organization's journey.

## 9. Provide a Graceful Exit

Offering an ineffective board member a graceful exit is crucial. This might include a celebration of their contributions, transitioning them to an honorary or advisory role, or involving them in selecting their successor. Such gestures can help maintain a positive relationship and honor their commitment to the cause.

## 10. Learn and Adapt from the Transition

Reflect on the experience of having an ineffective board member and use it as a learning opportunity. Analyze the recruitment process, the clarity of role expectations, and the onboarding and support provided to board members. Making adjustments in these areas can prevent similar situations in the future and enhance the overall functioning of the board.

1. <https://boardsource.org/resources/board-size-finding-the-sweet-spot/> and <https://www.boardeffect.com/blog/board-size-nonprofit-governance/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)