

# REIMAGINING BOARDS FOR HIGH IMPACT

Fulfilling purpose through networks centered on community and connected by mission, relationships, and trust.

*This brief is authored by network leadership experts Marty Kooistra and Jane Wei-Skillern, PhD and not by BoardSource. The following interviews and recommendations are informed by BoardSource's work on Purpose-Driven Board Leadership and conducted with permission by the authors. This is not an official BoardSource resource.*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Nonprofit organizations rely heavily on their relevance, both perceived and real, to fuel their resource generation efforts.** Social impact organizations are always faced with the perennial challenge of achieving an ambitious mission with severely limited resources and capacities. A focus on funding organizational-level issues is both logical and commonplace among board leaders, yet this focus can also be limiting.

Our mainstream nonprofit governance model relies on a board of directors or trustees, to provide strategic direction, create the resource engine capability and oversee management. The degree to which boards are deeply engaged varies widely depending on several factors, such as: age, size, mission, and executive leadership of the organization. Often the pressures and mechanisms of raising resources dominate attention and limits the line of sight to organizational sustainability or worse, survival. What if leaders could grow their impact without growing their organizations? Could the counterintuitive approach of broadening one's focus and looking externally actually be a path to greater impact?

BoardSource's [Purpose-Driven Board Leadership](#) is a call to boards of directors to ensure that an "internal" orientation does not dominate. It implores us to be aware of and engage in the ecosystem and focus on equity. The principles of network leadership from research over the past two decades by Dr. Jane Wei-Skillern's research dovetail with the principles of purpose-driven boards. Collectively, Wallestad and Wei-Skillern's research strongly suggests that it is indeed possible to scale impact not through organizational growth but through building and strengthening a range of networks.

Drawing on interviews with current nonprofit leaders and grounded in decades of research and experience working with nonprofits seeking to grow their impact, this paper offers six primary areas where boards can focus their energy to strengthen community relationships and dramatically increase their impact.

The six primary areas include:

1. Allocate Board Time to Mission Critical Activities
2. Build Community Voices into the Board
3. Ground Board Decision-Making in Community Wisdom
4. Deepen Board-Staff Connections
5. Bring Network Aspirations to the Ecosystem
6. Reframe Accountability and Success

We offer this resource as a tool for boards and executive leaders as a starting point to generate introspective conversations and create a roadmap for building networks for social change.

## INTRODUCTION

**Today's nonprofit boards of directors are challenged like never before.** Sustained impact requires organizations to be visionary and continually responsive. Boards have to evolve with intention. A compelling rationale, a deliberate plan for change, and deep commitment are imperative. For two decades, we've been researching, applying, and advocating for the principles of [networked leadership](#). This approach is both intrinsically positioned to focus on impact first and enable organizations to adapt and build communities that are greater than the sum of their individual parts. The model is rooted in four key values: trust, humility, ecosystem, and a purpose before organization mindset, which together define the culture and activities of the collaboration.

The idea of subordinating the organization in any way may raise eyebrows among dedicated board members. This counterintuitive way of thinking received a powerful and timely boost with BoardSource's principles of [Purpose-Driven Board Leadership](#). Purpose-driven board leadership shifts the focus to the ecosystem in which a mission is carried out. This centers the purpose before the organization and must therefore be built upon a foundation of equity. The synergy with networked leadership is clear. Since that article came out in 2021, we've seen a spike in interest among nonprofit leaders hungry for fresh, effective ways to do their work.

In response, we listened to and documented the experiences of more than a dozen nonprofit leaders, both executives and board members, who exemplify many aspects of these complementary frameworks: mission-focused, entrepreneurial, high-impact yet exceedingly humble. They shared what they've learned, how they've evolved, and offered insights on nurturing support for new ways of thinking and leading. In their stories, we found both validations of the real-world value of these approaches and a clear call to support boards in applying these ideas to their unique contexts.

We heard time and again from these leaders that the most critical ingredient in their recipe for success was the cultivation of deep relationships and trust. This was not surprising, as over the years, we have seen firsthand that it is impossible to overstate the importance of these elements. Thriving relationships, at multiple levels, are the lifeblood of every high-impact collaboration. Trust — with communities served, between board and staff, and even among boards in competing or related fields — must be deliberately built and continually cultivated. High-impact organizations are effective in part because they're woven into the social fabric of the communities that they serve, working synergistically with the community and responding and adapting to community needs.

At the same time, boards whose members nurture strong relationships with each other can leverage resources, expertise, and capacities to address large, complex problems that dwarf even the largest and most abundantly resourced organizations. Also not surprisingly, we heard from experienced network leaders that succeeding in this way of working requires committed time and attention. The following pages offer six practical recommendations to support your own board's efforts. Each one is enriched by glimpses into the experiences and mindsets of networked nonprofit leaders who demonstrate purpose-driven board leadership.

---

**"Relationships move at the speed of trust, and social change moves at the speed of relationships."**

– JUNE HOLLEY, NETWORK WEAVING INSTITUTE

---

## RECOMMENDATION 1: ALLOCATE BOARD TIME TO MISSION CRITICAL ACTIVITIES

A consistent observation from leaders we interviewed is that there is never enough time to invest in deep network relationships. Closer reflection reveals that board time is often spent on comparatively inconsequential issues, leaving insufficient time for strategic thinking. Evaluating alignment between mission and community needs, identifying current and potential collaboration partners, and determining how well the organization is delivering on its vision and mission are as important as it gets for boards. Yet, they're also surprisingly easy to neglect.

Something as simple as a time allocation roadmap can contribute to success. With it in place, all board members share accountability for keeping meetings focused on important matters. This includes designing purposeful agendas, using meetings to build trusting and supportive relationships with each other and with executive leadership and staff, and dedicating meaningful time during meetings to connect with, listen to, and learn from the staff, especially those on the front lines, and the communities they are engaging. This latter focus is at the heart of networked leadership, and it can be nothing short of transformative: it enriches, and sometimes challenges, board members' understanding of their organization's role and impact in the ecosystem; it can identify gaps in service; and it affords board members the humility and vulnerability essential to being true network partners.

Vito Borrello, Founding Executive Director of the National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement (NAFSCE) in Alexandria, Virginia, stressed the importance of board relationships. "Their value should not be underestimated. You can have conversations that you can't have if you were sitting behind a desk. Authentic relationships and trust can be developed when you are purposeful about being open. Now you're in a far better position to talk about things that are challenging or threatening, once you have strong relationships." Relationship building requires intentionality across time — boards must create the right environment and build in the time during every meeting.

Sustainable Conservation (SusCon) in San Francisco, California is governed by a diverse board representing the organization's wide ranging constituents, such as farming, industry, government, and the nonprofit sector. These leaders bring a mix of knowledge and skills to advance SusCon's work. While the board plays a key role in helping the organization raise funds, stay focused on its mission, and remain fiscally strong, it also contributes substantially to strategic discussions and vision. Board meetings go far beyond the perfunctory work and mundane details common to many board meetings. Instead, staff routinely pose complex questions to their board to help them formulate the most impactful strategies. SusCon CEO Ashley Boren shares, "We're always teeing up discussions on strategy and asking, 'What do you think?' Because board members bring many different perspectives based on their backgrounds and experience, we want the board informing our strategies."

---

**"We're always teeing up discussions on strategy and asking,  
'What do you think?'"**

– ASHLEY BOREN, SusCon

---

## RECOMMENDATION 2: BUILD COMMUNITY VOICES INTO THE BOARD

2021's [Leading with Intent: BoardSource Index of Nonprofit Board Practices](#) documents prevailing trends in nonprofit boards. While this comprehensive report offers a generally encouraging portrait of productive, committed leadership, it also identifies an issue of concern. The data indicate that boards are often disconnected from the communities and the people they serve; lacking in racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity; under-informed about “ecosystems” of which their organization is a part; and preoccupied with fundraising.

These findings reflect factors that, while not universal, commonly drive board behavior: an inward gravitational pull draws boards into program, staffing, or resource development issues. Tactics and outputs related to fund development frequently dominate, particularly during resource starvation cycles that demand the board's full attention.

Those are not trivial concerns. But purpose-driven boards understand the importance of active relationships with the communities that they aim to serve and support, and they know how those connections can be enhanced through the board recruitment process. Typically, the process is guided by a matrix delineating desired characteristics for board members, emphasizing gender, race and ethnicity, geography, skill sets, age, and so on. Although helpful in identifying current gaps, these lenses might make the recruitment process too myopic and rote, missing the opportunity for a new focus on transformational leadership.

Shifting the framework might prove helpful. Consider recruiting for representation in each of these four categories: “Issue Knowers,” “Resource Controllers,” “Innovators and Problem Solvers,” and “Integrators & Networkers.”

**Adapted from:** Tropman, J. (1997). *Successful Community Leadership*.

**Derived from:** Cohen, Michael D., James G. March, Johan P. Olsen. A Garbage Can Model of Organizational Choice. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No. 1. (Mar., 1972).

Some cautions remain. For example, a tendency to focus on overcoming financial resource scarcity can lead to a recruitment emphasis on “Resource Controllers” to the detriment of representation in the other three categories. Additionally, “Issue Knowers” are not solely service providers, agency leaders, or others who stand in for those the organization serves. The issues, challenges, and opportunities related to the organization's purpose are part of the lived experience of community members and beneficiaries, and their perspectives are invaluable to a purpose-driven board.



We use the term “ecosystem” to refer to a group of individual entities connected by interrelationships within a specific region and/or focus area. The web of relationships enables ecosystems to function like feedback loops, in which the experiences and data of individual members are capable of informing the behavior of the ecosystem overall.



“Issue Knowers” understand the problems, challenges, and difficulties faced by individuals and the community. “Innovators and Problem Solvers” are creative individuals who come up with ideas, solutions, and ways to get things done. “Resource Controllers” have influence on or access to the community resources critical to creating solutions. “Integrators and Networkers” bring together different individuals and groups — within an organization or a community — and help them work together.

---

**The issues, challenges, and opportunities related to the organization's purpose are part of the lived experience of community members and beneficiaries, and their perspectives are invaluable to a purpose-driven board.**

---

Strong representation from communities served is essential to a board's ability to formulate strategies anchored in the strengths, needs, and cultures of those communities. Strong representation goes beyond simply listening to the opinions of community members. The "who" is fundamental: an organization whose purpose is centered on community change of any kind must have both a board and a staff that reflect the communities to whom they strive to be in service. And the "how" is similarly critical: a commitment to co-creation must be evident in work that is led, designed, implemented, and assessed in close partnership with those communities.

Organizations that are community-based have this benefit inherently. Organizations that are "*community-facing*" or "*community-serving*" need to do the difficult introspective work that leads them to philosophies and practices that are truly effective in addressing persistent inequities. Large NGOs, International NGOs and associations face additional challenges. Organizations with long histories have an extra obligation to check their assumptions about the capacities, goals, and challenges of a community today. Change has always been a constant, but we're all aware that it's happening bigger and faster. A commitment to dedicated time spent listening, deep engagement, and rapid adaptation are essential for organizations who want to be a valuable network partner. These do not always come naturally for bigger and/or older organizations whose brands are rooted in a familiar and trusted model, even if changing circumstances make adaptation imperative. These organizations will find that connecting as closely as possible with community will offer the kind of deep insights that ground a productive path forward.

CARE USA, an international humanitarian relief and development organization based in Atlanta, Georgia, offers an example. Since the 1940s, the organization's work has been rooted in deep relationships built with both local and global partners. Anan Kittaneh, Chief Strategy Officer & Senior Director of Strategy and Planning, describes those collaborations as the biggest part of CARE USA's work and core to their business model. Furthermore, the organization has been intentional about selecting board members who bring extensive global experience or who come from the Global South. To promote greater local engagement, board members visit countries where CARE works, engage in dialogue with local leaders as part of board meeting agendas, and proactively listen to both local and country leaders. Additionally, CARE has steering committees comprised of local country leaders and partners that help shape the organization's work. As a result, partnerships on the ground are developed based on local needs and are extremely fluid and organic.

NAFSCE illustrates the value of prioritizing intentional and deep community relationships in two impactful ways. First, connections between support agencies, schools, and families are viewed as essential to advancing student well-being. Because the voices of parent family leaders are at the center of its work, a Parent Family Leaders Council is a standing board committee. Through this committee, parents actively participate at all levels in dialogue that will affect children in schools. Parents are seen as more than just survey respondents or data points; they're valued as essential contributors to programmatic strategy. In addition, NAFSCE's regional parent coalitions are, like its board-level council, characterized by their diverse representation of parents from across the country. This level of influential, sustained family engagement, and the direct line to parent perspectives it offers, fundamentally shapes NAFSCE's strategies and programs.

---

**Parents are seen as more than just survey respondents or data points; they're valued as essential contributors to programmatic strategy.**

---

A second noteworthy demonstration of NAFSCE's integration with the local community is found in its strategic planning process, in which stakeholder engagement was central. More than 70 community stakeholders — parents, peer organizations, government leaders, and others — served on task forces across the country. Diverse in expertise and experience, task force members were this plan's invaluable contributors and trusted community ambassadors. Their role as co-creators gave them authentic ownership of the strategy and confidence in the mutual benefit it offered to their communities and to NAFSCE. Vito Borrello observed that, "As they were going along with us to think about our shared work, they became invested. So the organizations that they led, they became involved as well." He notes that this approach has contributed to increased capacity and collaboration in the field as a whole, as people and organizations do more of their work through an integrated network rather than in institutional silos. "It's like a snowball — success breeds success."

### **RECOMMENDATION 3:**

## GROUND BOARD DECISION-MAKING IN COMMUNITY WISDOM

As discussed in the previous section, it is of paramount importance for nonprofit boards of directors to be accountable to both the direct beneficiaries of programs and services and the community more broadly. These are the board's stakeholders. Their voices must be integral to decision making, program and service delivery, and evaluation of the work.

A compelling illustration is found in the experience of American Baptist Home Mission Societies (ABHMS) in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania. To better serve community needs and leverage resources, ABHMS embarked on a multiyear network-building effort focused on building 'aligned action networks' among staff internally and directly with communities throughout the United States and Puerto Rico. The board already included several board members from the communities ABHMS served, and the organization built on this strength in a simple but powerful way by having those board members participate alongside staff in regional network leadership training sessions. Board members were eager to build stronger staff-board connections because they knew that this could translate to more effective programmatic efforts in their own communities. At the same time, staff appreciated that the participation of board members paved the way for broader support for their new network initiatives.

This mutual understanding not only helped keep board members highly engaged programmatically, it also built trust between staff, board members, and community members. This, in turn, helped staff innovate and forge new partnerships, as board-level engagement equipped them to tap into a broader network of support, resources, and connections. For example, this relational foundation enabled ABHMS leaders to mobilize quickly across regional and organizational boundaries to develop effective community emergency and relief services in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and Hurricane Ida. According to ABHMS executives Dr. Jeffrey Haggarty and Lisa Harris-Lee, "This emergency mobilization could not have been done successfully were it not for our network efforts and the relationships that were forged through the process."

Another perspective comes from Wendy Jackson, who has spent decades building conservation networks, most recently as senior vice president of the Land Trust Alliance in Washington, D.C. She notes that “People have to see themselves in your vision. Too many times, the community didn’t see themselves in our conservation vision.” In some past instances, Jackson saw colleagues advocating to protect water quality, endangered species, and other aspects of conservation very narrowly, without considering the interests or needs of their potential partners around the country. She says this focus was “getting nowhere fast,” and summarizes the statement of a potential partner as, “We don’t want a seat at your table. We want to blow the table up and build a new one together.”

---

**“We don't want a seat at your table.  
We want to blow the table up and build a new one together.”**

– WENDY JACKSON, LAND TRUST ALLIANCE

---

When Jackson and her colleagues began to listen to the community, they broadened their focus. They discussed green spaces that could promote physical and mental health for communities, create jobs, and promote children’s learning as well as provide environmental benefits. New partnerships developed and impact flourished when the community’s voice was sought out and when the community helped lead the process. Land Trust Alliance found ready allies and advocates that wanted to forge relationships, lend their support, and make progress together. “Relationships, relationships, relationships,” Jackson says firmly. “You won’t get to the mission if you don’t build relationships. I believe that people have to understand it’s not about people following you; it’s about going far together as co-leaders.”

Sustainable Conservation (SusCon) is a California-based conservation organization working in partnership with industry, government, and other nonprofits. They strive to understand environmental challenges facing a range of industries, researching and formulating win-win solutions and supporting implementation and policies facilitating widespread adoption of those approaches. SusCon uses a network approach in virtually everything they do. Perhaps not surprisingly, their board is not a fundraising board. Instead, members are a diverse group of content experts, environmental scientists, conservationists, and philanthropists, with strong representation from some of the key industries that they seek to influence, such as farming and horticulture. It is this mix of perspectives and expertise that enables the organization to formulate strategies integrating the private, nonprofit, and public sectors and to work flexibly in networks to support the implementation of joint solutions to environmental challenges. This relatively small organization leverages deep and varied expertise to catalyze networks that have achieved dramatic statewide and sometimes even national impacts on a range of issues from habitat restoration to water management, soil sustainability, and climate change.

In networked leadership, the foundation of program design is partnership with the community, directly and from the beginning. Community response is not an afterthought or a chance to seek endorsement of key decisions after they have already been made. To achieve real impact, networks must focus on shared priority and purpose in true partnership with the community. Nonprofits that are vital partners in their communities and catalysts in their networks, and the dramatic impacts that they have achieved, teach us that these values and principles are worthy of serious consideration.

## RECOMMENDATION 4: DEEPEN BOARD-STAFF CONNECTIONS

Depending on the size of an organization, its age, and its focus, the relationship between the governing board and the operating staff can range from unhealthy to nearly non-existent. Even in prominent nonprofits, it's not necessarily surprising to hear front-line staff ask, "Our board? Who are they? We've never seen them." The connection between a nonprofit's board and its staff is vital to purpose-driven, networked leadership. Relationships and trust have been a recurring theme in our preceding recommendations, but the board-staff partnership is so critical that it warrants a recommendation of its own.

Over the past few decades, the nonprofit sector has spent a lot of time training startup and growing organizations to stay attuned to the demarcation between governance and management, and to respect the roles, boundaries and distinctive work of each. There is good reason for this. When roles are insufficiently differentiated, boundaries can be violated, and board involvement can go too deep into operations. This risk must be managed for reasons such as governing leaders have to maintain their ability to make wise decisions. These decisions are fundamentally informed by a solid understanding of work on the ground, which board members will glean from building a trusting relationship with operating staff, not from micromanaging them.

The Grunin Foundation in Toms River, New Jersey has sought to deepen the board-staff relationship and promote a sense of camaraderie. Their board members are committed and collaborative, and they lead with an equity mindset. This fosters shared focus and a natural inclination to act as one team. Executive Director Heather Barberi notes, "Because we don't work in a hierarchical way, people feel like they can openly share their ideas for growth and change." Staff are trusted and empowered to lead with this support from the board, whose members contribute their expertise and resources to operational work as needed.

---

**"Because we don't work in a hierarchical way,  
people feel like they can openly share their ideas for growth and change."**

– HEATHER BARBERI, THE GRUNIN FOUNDATION

---

A similar dynamic is at play in Young Audiences Arts for Learning, New Jersey and Eastern Pennsylvania. President and CEO Michelle Russo routinely asks field staff to present to the board, including them as much as possible without overburdening them. These presentations reflect Russo's commitment to ensuring that the staff receive credit for their work, which strengthens the board's confidence and trust in their leadership. Regular orientation sessions and numerous other engagements throughout the year provide additional opportunities for meaningful connection and knowledge sharing between board members and staff who lead projects.

Ashley Boren of SusCon knows her board members have valuable insights. She and other staff actively seek out that wisdom, and in a particularly impactful way. Staff routinely present to the board, allowing the board to understand both what they're working on and their approach. Boren explains the intentionality and benefits of this approach: "We manage to get the balance right, where the board members provide their perspective and advice but leave it to staff to decide on whether and how to incorporate that advice. We often take their advice, but not always. The Board has a strong understanding and respect for its role versus the role of the staff. They also recognize that our staff is working on advancing the organization's programs and mission every day, and trust



that staff will make good and informed decisions. Because they often see their advice incorporated into our work, board members know they are being listened to and are part of a true thought partnership. And when they see the results, they feel genuine ownership and have confidence that we collectively know what we're doing.”

Our first recommendation in this article was to “allocate board time toward mission critical activities.” The examples in this section have built on that notion by underscoring the unique potential of board meetings for deepening the board-staff connection — in these cases, through strategic discussions on issues about which staff seek the board's advice, rather than a cursory list of proceedings and a rubber-stamp approval process. Additionally, many leaders specifically design board meetings to include more informal relationship-building opportunities through, for example, pre-board meeting dinners and free time for networking. This promotes trust through authentic and open communication, which in turn better enables conversations about tactical work. Collectively, board members and staff all feel that their ideas are really being listened to and that they're all learning and making progress together.

### RECOMMENDATION 5: BRING NETWORK ASPIRATIONS TO THE ECOSYSTEM

If an organization adopts an aspirational vision statement, it usually does so to inspire all involved to work towards that vision, sometimes believing it's possible, and other times believing it's “just what vision statements are supposed to be like.” Our advocacy for networked leadership is rooted in many years of research and experience, which has shown that organizations can increase both their own and the broader field's capacity through networks. As a result, organizations and their boards can be more ambitious, yet more likely to reach their goals, when they work through networks.

Boards play an instrumental role in encouraging staff to have an external-impact orientation rather than solely an internal, organizational one. They can help executives see the broader possibilities through collaborations and can provide valuable support, in multiple forms, to staff who have stepped up to lead the effort to grow their impact through networks. All of this is most effective when modeled by board actions that reinforce a network mindset. So often, staff struggle to convince their board of the merits of an innovative and possibly risky approach. If a board does not embrace the “why” of networks while the senior leadership is trying to lead from that basis, staff will face not only the inherent challenges of network work, but also likely resistance from front-line staff and potential partners that compound obstruction or discouragement from the board of directors. This is “adaptive” work, and leaders who are truly committed to impact need to nurture a very strong partnership between the board chair and executive staff. This is definitely a two-way street.

One of this article's co-authors, Marty, has his own first-hand experience. When he assumed the executive leadership role at the Housing Development Consortium of Seattle-King County, he was aware of the many internal and external matters that needed to be addressed. He and the new board chair agreed to have a face-to-face meeting over lunch every Friday in order to deepen their relationship while talking candidly about priorities, pitfalls, and strategies for moving forward. This “sounding board” connection made it



Adaptive leadership is key to a board's ability to work for results, especially in a context that centers on equity. It targets adaptive challenges that, unlike technical challenges, don't come with a manual or an expert to call. Instead, the people involved in adaptive leadership must create solutions together. Success depends on their ability to coordinate and align on a wide scale and on their willingness to change beliefs and habits, adopt new roles, challenge established practice, and combine expertise with flexibility.

*Adapted from: Heifetz, R. and Linsky, M. (2009). The practice of adaptive leadership. Harvard Business School Press.*

possible to adhere to the “doctrine of no surprises” and ensured mutual clarity and trust regarding the purpose of their networked leadership. While the two years over which this relationship lasted involved some of the most challenging work of his career, they were also the most fruitful.

NAFSCE board member Deborah Roderick Stark shares a related story. “We naturally create a **space** to be able to collaborate so staff do not have to design the organization primarily around worries of competition and resources. Stable funding has helped — so NAFSCE is not constantly scrambling. This enables us to be better partners.” According to NAFSCE’s Vito Borrello, the board “trusts and lets go a bit. We’ve identified core values and make sure that we work in such a way to demonstrate these core values. I am a leader who is comfortable taking some risks, and the board is not afraid to think that way either.” Consequently, the impact of the work carried out by NAFSCE and its partners is much greater than the sum of their individual contributions. Borrello sums it up NAFSCE’s mindset in this way: “What we might gain is far greater than what we might lose, especially when we don’t have much to begin with.” In any organization, the scale of the problem is usually so large and complex that even the most well-resourced organization likely has more to gain through collaboration than it could ever lose.

Bob Sonnenberg, President of Earle Baum Center of the Blind in Santa Rosa, California, was already leading through a vibrant network of collaborations. But recognizing the demographic shifts toward an older adult population and longer life expectancy, he wanted to find and explore complementary opportunities. These included organizations such as Centers for Aging, which served a population with a range of health concerns, including visual impairment. His board embraced the possibilities and is ready to explore new partnerships. Sonnenberg notes, “As much as I love to have a philanthropic, supportive, donor-focused board, the other gift is making introductions and expanding the network of services that you can provide.” He believes a board role gives leaders a chance to experiment with new things. “Part of the responsibility of being a board member is to be unafraid to expand your reach, and that of the organization that you support. That’s how you can learn; the more you do something, it increases your comfort level, and as you realize success at doing it, it feeds on itself.”

---

**“Part of the responsibility of being a board member is to be unafraid to expand your reach, and that of the organization that you support. That’s how you can learn; the more you do something, it increases your comfort level, and as you realize success at doing it, it feeds on itself.”**

– BOB SONNENBERG, EARL BAUM CENTER OF THE BLIND

---

Leaders in other fields that have worked extensively through networks emphasize the same ethos in their work. Blue Ecology, a water-focused climate change initiative in British Columbia, Canada, is based on indigenous and science-based knowledge. Founder Michael Blackstock describes his perspective by saying, “In my heart, I don’t want to spend too much time talking about vision and mission. My board and I agree that it’s walking the talk that opens pathways to growing our social impact. Elders say you learn by doing. Relationship-building with others in the network of folks striving to create hope for future generations is also critical in building momentum.”

The Partnership for Water Sustainability in British Columbia is a network of senior government leaders in water management. Executive Director Kim Stephens, a colleague of Blackstock’s, echoes his sentiment. “Our role is to support those in the field. We never say to our members, ‘The Partnership wants you to do ‘x’.’ Instead, when there is a provincial policy, we help our local government partners figure out how to translate that into action. The

Partnership for Water Sustainability seeks to align efforts provincially, regionally, and locally, while also building relationships within the stewardship sector. Our members trust us to help them do their work. Change is not from the top. Even if a provincial mandate is top-down, we take a bottom-up approach to implementation.”

One additional type of relationship that is rarely nurtured, but offers tremendous network potential, is that of direct board-to-board connections. Organizations are typically accustomed to working in silos and worrying about their own budgets, programs, fundraising, and institutional health. Board-to-board relationships can foster greater partnership and less competition among nonprofits. This can be significant, because it can single handedly break down the major barrier to eliminating redundancies and capitalizing on opportunities for co-creation and greater sustainability and impact at the field level.

Parent Possible of Denver, Colorado supports the ability of parents to have a positive impact on their children’s development. They firmly ground their work in what they need to do to best support their primary customers: parents. This shift in mindset puts the organization’s purpose first. Its ramifications go far beyond the programs they provide and their fundraising efforts to encompass how the organization governs, makes decisions, and collaborates within their ecosystem. Executive Director Heather Tritten emphasizes that “the biggest thing for boards is to look past one’s organization to the organization’s purpose. When we join together we are just stronger, can get more done, and we have more effective boards.”

It is no surprise to us when we hear that an organization achieving sustainable, effective, and efficient impact is led by consummate networkers. These leaders are always looking outward, forging new relationships, and investing in building trust. Boards play a pivotal role in formulating and supporting such a strategy. It’s clear from the experiences of the leaders quoted in this section that failing to do so is a tremendous missed opportunity.

## RECOMMENDATION 6: REFRAME ACCOUNTABILITY AND SUCCESS

In the natural evolution of a successful nonprofit, communicating success becomes a core part of raising resources. While this is important for any viable organization, a single-minded focus may lead an organization to lose sight of both its mission and the ecosystem in which it is a part. We are all too aware that branding and organizational growth alone are insufficient to move the needle on any issue. Yet it is not uncommon to see siloed organizations advancing their own agendas and honing their marketing as if these were mission-critical. Furthermore, this kind of hyperfocus can foster an unhealthy emphasis on competition around size, brand, influence, and fundraising. This isolates organizations, hinders the open sharing of information and expertise, and limits substantive participation in broader networks that require deep partnership within and across sectors. Such isolation can also inhibit board members, who are also donors, if they become so loyal to the institution and its brand that they’re insufficiently aware of the magnitude and nature of the challenges their organization works to address. And again, perhaps most critically: making a meaningful impact on the challenges faced by nonprofits invariably demands resources well beyond those of even the most abundantly resourced. The most effective way to harness these resources is through humility rather than ego.

Parent Possible’s Heather Tritten explains that they start not with the goal of growing their organization, but rather with finding the most effective way to serve families. She notes that there is “no point to having a successful organization if we don’t have successful families.” Consistent with this mindset, Parent Possible staff and board members strive to avoid using fundraising success or organization size as proxies for impact. This means working from a network frame of reference, reflecting a belief that they become stronger, and more impactful, by building community rather than reverting to competition.

---

**Staff and board members strive to avoid using fundraising success or organization size as proxies for impact. This means working from a network frame of reference, reflecting a belief that they become stronger, and more impactful, by building community rather than reverting to competition.**

---

CARE USA puts a strong emphasis on investing in relationships at multiple levels. The board is committed to growing the network through organization-wide partnerships that sit at a very high level and are focused on large organizational relationships from a strategy perspective. They are, however, one hundred percent clear that local partnerships are of the utmost importance to impact on the ground. The board proactively seeks to grow both of these types of networks by promoting local leadership and capacity and providing support through its global partnerships. This translates to a strategy driven by impact rather than money. The board and senior staff are in full agreement that the goal is not simply to raise money to grow the *organization*; rather, they set revenue goals to grow their *impact*. This impact focus naturally reinforces trust-based relationships. Thus, partnerships on the ground have been very dynamic, with a substantial percentage of CARE's work delivered with and through partners, even if CARE does not always get the credit. The board does not dictate or mandate strategy or programmatic activities at the country level, since those decisions must be bound by local reality. CARE USA's board is highly cognizant of the diversity in capacities and focus throughout their organization and aware that they drive the success of its many partnerships. Yet deep local relationships are the underpinnings for all their work. Mutual trust and reciprocal support between the different levels of leadership are in the organization's DNA. Hence, the number and health of its partnerships on the ground — not revenue growth — are key metrics of CARE USA's global strategy.

## IN CONCLUSION

A theme that stood out among the leaders we interviewed was their organizations' efforts to have board members gain a deeper understanding of the issues that community members are facing. This can be accomplished by offering them more opportunities to interact directly with front line staff and program participants versus merely hearing secondhand anecdotes or reading evaluation reports. It's difficult to conceive of an organization capable of truly addressing inequity externally if it cannot find its way to be equitable internally. Leaders we spoke with also stressed the importance of focusing on more than just their own organization's contribution to meeting the need defined by their mission. They were passionate about the importance of connecting with others who also seek to serve that need, even those who are "competitors" in the fundraising space. Such humility and vulnerability are necessary precursors to both relevance and impact. A continuous effort to identify potential network partners, foster trust, and build a new narrative that attracts higher levels of investment — aka 'growing the pie' — is something we have certainly seen play out among leading networked nonprofits. While it may take a leap of faith, reimagining boards for impact is one of the most powerful tools for transformational change in the social impact space. Extensive research and experience have made it increasingly clear that building networks of community-based partners offer the clearest path toward greater efficiency, effectiveness, and sustainability of impact.

## THANK YOU TO OUR INTERVIEWEES:

**Heather Barberi**, Executive Director, Grunin Foundation. <https://gruninfoundation.org>

**Michael Blackstock**, Founder, Blue Ecology. <https://waterbucket.ca/wcp/category/blue-ecology-michael-blackstock>

**Ashley Boren**, CEO, Sustainable Conservation. <https://suscon.org>

**Vito Borrello**, Founding Executive Director, National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement (NAFSCE). <https://nafsce.org>

**Dr. Jeffrey Haggray**, Executive Director, American Baptist Home Mission Societies (ABHMS). <https://abhms.org>

**Lisa Harris-Lee**, Director of Healing and Transforming Communities, ABHMS. <https://abhms.org>

**Wendy Jackson**, Former Executive Vice President, Land Trust Alliance. <https://landtrustalliance.org>

**Anan Kittaneh**, Chief Strategy Officer & Senior Director of Strategy and Planning, CARE USA. <https://my.care.org>

**Derek Richmond**, Founding Member and Director, The Partnership for Water Sustainability in British Columbia. <https://waterbucket.ca>

**Deborah Roderick Stark**, Principal, Roderick Stark and Associates. <https://nafsce.org/page/BoardofDirectors>

**Michelle Russo**, President and CEO, Young Audiences Arts for Learning, New Jersey and Eastern Pennsylvania. <https://www.youngaudiences.org>

**Bob Sonnenberg**, President, Earle Baum Center of the Blind, <https://earlebaum.org>

**Kim Stephens**, Executive Director, The Partnership for Water Sustainability in British Columbia, <https://waterbucket.ca>

**Heather Tritten**, Executive Director, Parent Possible, <https://www.parentpossible.org>

## APPENDIX A: PRACTICAL TIPS

**Recommendation 1:** Boards might consider assessing their use of meeting time. Some boards annually develop a “time allocation roadmap,” planning for the time they’ll spend together as a governing body based on the total number of hours available over the year (which is often a mere 24 hours or so). This exercise underscores how essential it is for boards to distinguish the “must dos” — work that’s necessary to achieve purpose — from the “should dos and could dos.”

**Recommendation 2:** Ask yourself if your board recruitment process helps you achieve a purpose-driven, network-oriented board of directors. Is it purely internally driven, or does it offer a transparent way for community to participate in the nominations process?

**Recommendation 3:** Ask your nominating committee or board stewardship committee to coordinate an assessment of the degree to which your board is grounded in community input. Use the results as a framework for board discussion, identifying strategies for improvement. Set aside a healthy amount of time at a board meeting for an expert to present a “spectrum of community engagement.” The focus would be on outlining the range of engagement levels from “inform” to “ownership” in your context, with discussion of your organization’s work along that spectrum. Create a tool to assess how well the design of new programs, projects, and initiatives reflect integration with community, and consider including those metrics in evaluation of existing efforts.

**Recommendation 4:** Plan one or two opportunities for board members to have meaningful interaction with front-line staff, preferably in their work context. If not all board members can participate, ask those who did to share reflections on their experience at the next meeting of the full board.

**Recommendation 5:** Form a workgroup to fully map out all the public, private, and nonprofit entities working in the same space your organization works. For each one, define the nature of your organization’s relationship, identify areas of opportunity, and make a plan to engage with the leadership (if they’re nonprofits, consider meeting with their boards of directors). If a purpose strongly calls for working in a more networked way, identify the three most critical adaptive challenges that your organization must address. Set aside dedicated time at future board meetings to address them one by one.

**Recommendation 6:** Ask: “If the vision statement of our organization were to be fully realized, what would our outcomes need to be?” Assess your performance against this. Add up the performance of everyone working in the same issue ecosystem and assess that performance against your vision’s aspiration. Meet with others to reflect on ways in which a more cumulative “ecosystem approach” to documentation, reporting, and performance assessment could be enacted.