



# What Makes a GOOD 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 exceptional board members.



FOCUS ON SENSE MAKING  
AND PURPOSE AS WELL AS  
STRATEGY, OVERSIGHT  
AND RESOURCES.

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



**Don't Do:** 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.



FOCUS ON  
LISTENING, NOT  
JUST PARTICIPATING.

To encourage robust discussion during board meetings, board members must be prepared to listen as well as engage. Exceptional board members are careful not to dominate discussions and ensure that everyone, including quieter board members, have 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.



**Don't Do:** 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.



## UNDERSTAND THE BALANCE BETWEEN GIVING THE CEO AMPLE ROOM TO MANAGE THE ORGANIZATION AND ENSURING THAT ETHICAL STANDARDS 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 legal standards and ethical norms. Adopting a “hands-off” management approach does not mean that board members can turn a blind eye to ethical improprieties. All board members should be familiar with the organization’s bylaws and understand how best to respond to any ethical issues that might arise.



### **Don't Do:**

When introducing issues or programs 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.



## ASK “NAÏVE” 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 constantly assess current and proposed projects to ensure they serve the organization’s mission and are setting 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. Good board members are not afraid to ask naïve questions because they trust their own instincts and want to improve their knowledge of the organization.



**Don't Do:** While asking questions is beneficial, board members must be prepared for rigorous discourse by reading all the materials provided to them during new board member orientation and in advance of a board meeting. Posing a question that has been answered in the materials provided may show a lack of attention or interest.

## WHAT MAKES A GOOD BOARD MEMBER?



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



**Don't Do:** While it is important to discuss the organization's work outside of the boardroom, board members must be careful not to gossip about confidential matters. No matter how informal the situation might seem, internal matters of the organization should remain just that — internal.



Above all else, good 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. Board meetings should not be seen as a chore; instead, they can help board members connect with their peers and maintain enthusiasm for their important responsibilities.

REMAIN ENERGETIC IN LEARNING ABOUT AND HELPING THE ORGANIZATION.



**Don't Do:** Be wary of board members who have lost their excitement for board service. Occasionally, fatigued or irritable board members are a sign of problems with the staff or board processes, but a lack of enthusiasm might also mean it is time for certain members to roll off the board.

*Adapted and later updated from a featured speech at the 2007 BoardSource Leadership Forum by Susan V. Berresford, then president and CEO, Ford Foundation.*



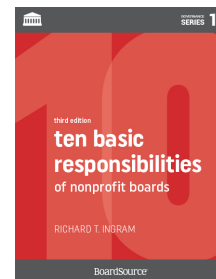
## HELPFUL RESOURCES



[Board Fundamentals](#)



[Culture of Inquiry](#)



[Ten Basic Responsibilities of Nonprofit Boards](#)



[The Board Chair Handbook](#)