

Support 100 New Haven Breast Cancer Patients,  
a project by [The Haven](#)



# How To Build An Effective Board

*A Short Guide For Nonprofit Leaders*

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## PART 1

# Understand Purpose And Core Duties

So, why does your nonprofit need a board? And what does a board do? You probably already know, a nonprofit is legally required to have a board of directors. The board is a mechanism for democratic decision-making, fiscal responsibility, and mission fulfillment. Let's break a board's purpose into four key areas:

### GOVERNANCE

Boards provide critical mission, financial, legal, and administrative oversight, managing your executive director and the board itself to help ensure all decisions are made in alignment with your organization's mission.

### FUNDRAISING

Board members help set and meet fundraising goals.

### AWARENESS AND VISIBILITY

Board members build and maintain relationships that can help your nonprofit meet its goals.

### TECHNICAL RESOURCES AND SUPPORT

Board members have in-demand skills that can help your nonprofit overcome challenges.





## PART 2

# Develop A Solid Structure

Board structure is important. It can be the difference between a high-functioning board, and one that doesn't function at all! It is critical to explicitly outline your board's structure, along with its purpose and duties, in your bylaws. Bylaws are legally-binding rules that govern how your board should operate. Here some common structural topics that are addressed in bylaws:

1. How are board members elected?
2. How many board members should you have?
3. How many votes does the board need to pass resolutions?
4. What roles should board members serve?
5. What terms do board members serve?
6. How often should the board meet?
7. What policies and ethical guidelines must board members follow?
8. What is the board's purpose?

Learn more about three key topics—board composition, structure, and terms—on the following two pages.

## COMPOSITION

An odd number of board members is best to avoid tied votes. Most boards have 7-19 members. The right size depends on the needs of your organization. Remember, if your board has too many members, it may hamper its ability to have meaningful discussions and make informed, timely decisions. If your board has too few members, it may not have the varied perspectives it needs to make informed decisions or effectively execute its core functions.

It's a good idea to require board members to elect officers who are assigned clear roles. For example, a board chair often presides over and moderates meetings; a secretary keeps a record of key decisions; and a treasurer leads budget discussions.

Depending on the size of your board, you may want to develop issue committees or taskforces of 3-4 members. This will allow board members to apply their expertise to specific challenges facing your nonprofit, such as high turnover or a capital campaign, or become specialists in specific operational areas, such as governance, auditing, finance or executive functions. Committees are typically charged with making voting recommendations to the larger board.



*Social Entrepreneurs of Japan's Disaster-Hit Areas, a project by [WIT](#)*

## MEETING STRUCTURE

Most nonprofits schedule quarterly or bi-annual board meetings, depending on the number of decisions and type of issues its board needs to consider. It's best practice to determine your board's meeting schedule at least one year in advance and boards may wish to consider whether they are comfortable allowing members to call-in, if they're unable to attend in person.

Don't forget to distribute the board meeting calendar to each board member at the beginning of the year. Lastly, your organization's executive director should hold one-on-one check-ins with members over the phone or via email on an as-needed basis to ensure your meetings are as productive as possible.



## TERMS

Setting service term limits ensures that your board has room for a wide variety of voices and fresh perspectives. It also helps board members stay active and committed. Typically, nonprofit board members serve two-year terms. Nonprofit leaders often invite effective board members to serve up to two consecutive two-year terms. It is common practice to allow members to serve a third term, but only after a one-year hiatus. Remember—board members should expect no monetary compensation for their service, and they should be willing to step down from the board or recuse themselves from votes when they have a conflict of interest.

### TOOL YOU CAN USE

## Online Board Assessment

Review your nonprofit's board performance, structure, and priorities with this simple assessment tool from Adelphi University:  
<http://bit.ly/AssessYourBoard>.



### PART 3

## Set Clear Responsibilities

Set clear responsibilities for your board members from the start, and remember to check in with members about their service on an ongoing basis. Below, you will find a sample annual check-in agenda to discuss with your existing board members and a sample list of board responsibilities to discuss with prospective board members.

#### TOOL YOU CAN USE

### Sample Annual Check-In Agenda

- ☐ What are your individual expectations and needs?
- ☐ What are your interest areas and committee obligations?
- ☐ What is your annual fundraising goal?
- ☐ What can you do to help recruit new board members, donors, and other organizational advocates?

## TOOL YOU CAN USE

### Sample List of Board Responsibilities

- ☐ Attend all board and relevant committee meetings and functions, such as special events
- ☐ Be informed about the organization's mission, services, policies, and programs, and be able to speak clearly and confidently about them
- ☐ Review agenda and supporting materials prior to board and committee meetings
- ☐ Serve on 1-2 committees or task forces and offer to take on special assignments
- ☐ Make a personal financial contribution to the organization
- ☐ Advocate on behalf of the organization
- ☐ Suggest possible nominees to the board who can make significant contributions to the work of the board and the organization
- ☐ Keep up-to-date on developments in the organization's field
- ☐ Adhere to conflict-of-interest and confidentiality policies
- ☐ Refrain from making special requests of the staff
- ☐ Assist the board in carrying out its fiduciary responsibilities, such as reviewing the organization's financial statements



## PART 4

# Ask For Financial Contributions

Fundraising is an important function of nonprofit boards. Here are six tips to help you engage your board members in this critical work:

1. Set a fundraising requirement for board members, or request a minimum pledge per year.
2. Ask board members to sign a letter of intent that acts as a record of their contribution commitment.
3. Develop realistic expectations. Let members know that nearly 80 percent of nonprofit organizations have a policy requiring board members to make a personal contribution on an annual basis, "[Leading with Intent: A National Index of Nonprofit Board Practices 2015](#)." Boards average 88 percent participation in giving, with about 60 percent of boards reaching 100 percent participation.
4. Encourage members to leverage their own networks to meet their fundraising goals.
5. Provide board members with a calendar of your major fundraising campaigns, along with instructions on how to set a contribution goal for each campaign and track their progress.
6. Implement a "friend-raising" strategy to increase visibility, build awareness for your organization, and grow your nonprofit's base of advocates, creating pipeline of prospective board members, donors, and volunteers.



*Educate Ethical and Innovative Leaders for Africa,  
a project by [Ashesi University Foundation](#)*

## PART 5

# Implement a Sustainable Recruitment Strategy

It is critical to select the right members for your board. Think strategically about who you need on your board and what kind of results you are hoping to achieve, and make recruitment a part of board service.

### SKILLS ASSESSMENT

Skills to consider include strategic planning, marketing, financial management, fundraising, leadership development, and legal. The skills you seek will vary based on the needs of your nonprofit. And remember, your board members should be fully capable and equipped to serve as brand ambassadors, and they should be able to speak clearly and confidently about your organization's mission and impact. To help assess fit before a board member commits, ask prospective members to fill out a one-page interest form.



*Support a Small Charity? Why Not Support 8,175?, a project by [Small Charities Coalition](#)*



## BOARD RECRUITMENT

Instruct each board member to annually introduce a minimum of three potential board nominees who could make significant contributions to the work of the board.



## MARKETING

Post board positions widely and publicly, and ask board members to circulate posted positions, too. Use high-traffic sites with specific tools for board recruitment such as the **Center for Nonprofit Excellence** and **LinkedIn For Nonprofits**. Don't forget to circulate your opening via your own social media like Facebook and Twitter and your personal and organizational LinkedIn pages. Here are three additional tips:

1. Email your personal and professional networks asking for contacts to re-circulate your board posting.
2. Recruit high net-worth or high-profile individuals or frequent donors or other advocates.
3. Ask your most loyal donors and supporters to share the position within their networks, or join the board themselves.



## Conclusion

Building an effective board is a step-by-step process that requires a nonprofit leader's ongoing attention. Breaking the task into five manageable parts can help ease the burden. It's all about understanding your board's purpose and core duties, developing a solid structure, setting clear responsibilities, asking for financial contributions, and implementing a sustainable recruitment strategy—areas covered in this guide.

Please visit [www.globalgiving.org/learn](http://www.globalgiving.org/learn) for more nonprofit management tips.



To learn more about the topics found in this document,  
visit [GlobalGiving.org/Learn](https://GlobalGiving.org/Learn).