



Grant Thornton

Not-for-profit board member handbook



Not-for-profit board members have a critical responsibility: to direct the organization toward achieving its mission. As a board member, you have the opportunity to contribute your talent, expertise and dedication to a worthy cause.

Serving on the board of a not-for-profit organization, particularly a highly visible one, is both an honor and a responsibility. As a board member, you must remain focused on providing good stewardship of the organization's mission, reputation and resources. The responsibility that comes with providing this stewardship need not be overwhelming, however. When you begin your board tenure with a solid overview of what you need to know and what will be expected of you, your orientation to board membership should go smoothly.

As you read through this handbook, you may uncover many questions you didn't know you had. Grant Thornton LLP's Not-for-Profit practice has the answers you're looking for. We're committed to providing outstanding service to meet all of your accounting, tax and advisory needs.

Contents

- 2 The special purpose of a not-for-profit organization
- 4 Board member roles, responsibilities and liabilities
- 14 Keeping the board effective
- 17 Accountability and integrity
- 22 Financial stewardship
- 28 Operating procedures
- 33 The board member's role: A recap
- 34 About Grant Thornton

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The special purpose of a not-for-profit organization

It is uniquely American to create and sustain voluntary associations that further religious, cultural, professional, social service and educational goals. As early as the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville observed the unique propensity of Americans to form voluntary associations to achieve great purposes, which is in contrast with most other nations, where governmental action is expected.

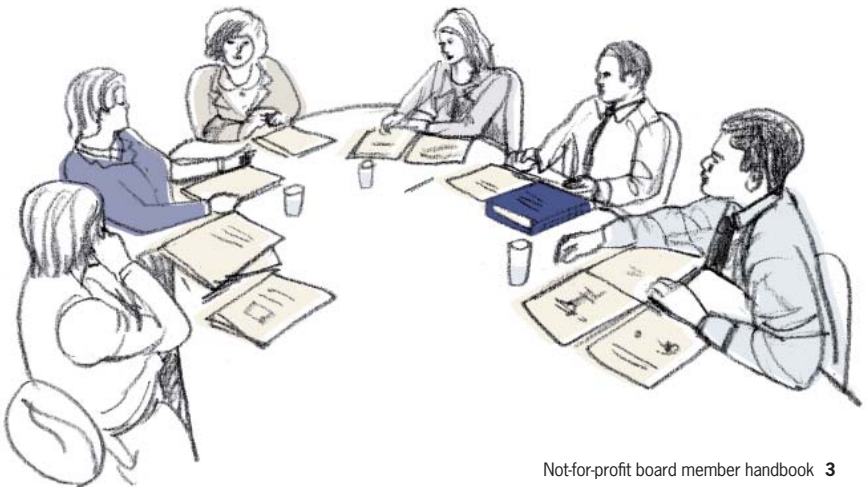
de Tocqueville said:

"Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly form associations. They have not only commercial and manufacturing companies, in which all take part, but associations of a thousand other kinds, religious, moral, serious, futile, general or restricted, enormous or diminutive. The Americans make associations to give entertainments, to found seminaries, to build inns, to construct churches, to diffuse books, to send missionaries to the antipodes; in this manner they found hospitals, prisons and schools. If it is proposed to inculcate some truth or to foster some feeling by the encouragement of a great example, they form a society. Wherever at the head of some new undertaking you see the government in France, or a man of rank in England, in the United States you will be sure to find an association.

Thus the most democratic country on the face of the earth is that in which men have, in our time, carried to the highest perfection the art of pursuing in common the object of their common desires and have applied this new science to the greatest number of purposes."

Our voluntary associations, which we label as not-for-profit organizations, are neither governments nor for-profit entities. The success of a not-for-profit organization is measured not by votes or by profits, but rather by the achievement of its unique mission, whether in the field of social service, professional development, education or religion. Not-for-profit organizations exemplify the American propensity for uniting to promote and advocate for a particular cause. The services they provide play a vital role in community and professional development.

Boards of directors (or boards of trustees) are the agents for directing not-for-profit organizations toward the achievement of their mission. These organizations collect and spend funds held in trust for a specific charitable or educational purpose. And they are provided a tax exemption because their goals support the public good.



Board member roles, responsibilities and liabilities

Once a board member has been selected, it is important that he or she be brought up to speed as quickly as possible. New board members should receive a briefing from the chairperson and a tour of the organization's facilities. Further, organizations should offer a formal board orientation program covering such topics as how the board functions, management duties vs. board duties, indemnification and insurance, board committees, information flow, delegation, and authority.

Ideally, the organization should make available a board orientation book or other sourcebook containing the following information:

- The organization's articles of incorporation, bylaws and amendments
- A statement of the organization's history, mission and services
- The organization's strategic plan
- Regular financial and operating reports from the past year
- The most recent audited financial statements, including the management letter
- A copy of the directors' and officers' (D&O) liability policy
- A copy of the Code of Conduct policy
- A contact sheet listing the names, addresses and contact information of board members
- A list of the organization's key executives
- Rules about expense forms and reimbursement
- A calendar of the upcoming year's board meetings, to include dates, times and locations
- Minutes of meetings held within the past year
- The conflict-of-interest policy and summary of related disclosures
- Copies of any recent regulatory filings, including Form 990
- Results of any governmental audits

While it is not necessary to be conversant with all of that information — in its considerable volume — board members should be aware of its contents and know when to consult it.

The role of the board

The board should not be distracted from certain key responsibilities that are essential to its success:

- **Preserving and, when necessary, reshaping the mission** — This is the board’s most important role. Board members need to make certain that a strategic plan is in place describing how the organization will fulfill its mission going forward. In addition, board members should measure each proposed action against both the organization’s mission and its approved plans.
- **Selecting the CEO** — Another important role for the board is the selection of the CEO, or principal staff person, to provide full-time leadership for the organization and to recommend and implement the policies and programs approved by the board. Sometimes the board’s responsibility will include confirmation of those nominated for key positions by the CEO.
- **Ensuring that the organization is well-managed** — While the board should not manage the organization, it should be satisfied that the organization is managed effectively. To achieve that task, the board should ask enough questions to satisfy itself that a sufficient number of qualified staff members are assigned to key tasks, resources are allocated through a realistic budget consistent with the mission, internal controls are in place to prevent fraud or noncompliance, proper ethical and governance standards are followed, and the programs of the organization have clearly defined purposes and are successful in achieving those purposes.

Board member roles, responsibilities and liabilities

- **Representing the external world to the organization and the organization to the external world** — The board serves as what is sometimes called “a bridge and a buffer.” Board members advocate on behalf of the organization, helping to raise awareness of its mission. Hence, board members are often involved in the solicitation of major donors. It is also important for the board to be sensitive to the environment in which the organization operates. In that capacity, the board should give the organization’s staff important feedback about how policies, plans and programs need to change in response to a changing world.
- **Protecting the organization from external threats** — In the lives of many organizations, issues arise that threaten the autonomy, services or good name of the organization. Such issues include scandals involving the organization — or similar organizations — or political attacks on the purposes or programs of the organization. In these circumstances, board members need to step forward to explain and defend the organization.
- **Exercising financial stewardship** — The board is responsible for approving the budget as well as major financial transactions, such as the issuance of debt. The board manages the endowment of the organization, usually through an investment committee, and approves the goals of fundraising campaigns. In addition, the board tends to play a major role in supporting capital campaigns by donating personal time and financial resources.

- **Being certain that the board has the right skills and practices to do its job** — The board needs individuals with a strong commitment to the fundamental purpose and mission of the organization. Boards should consider performing an annual inventory of talent to assess whether the right professional capabilities are represented on the board. The board should also include individuals with the specific skills and know-how needed to examine issues through multiple lenses: legal, financial, public relations and communications, management, and professional development, among others. The board must also be attentive to its internal processes, so that its meetings focus only on board-level matters and do so in a way that draws upon the combined knowledge and experience represented at the table.
- **Making sure that the organization is in compliance with laws and regulations** — Being exempt from most taxes does not mean that the organization is exempt from regulation. Far from it. The board should be aware of federal and state laws and regulations that apply to the organization, along with applicable standards set by accreditors, bond covenants and charity watchdog groups.

Board member roles, responsibilities and liabilities

Your duties as an individual board member

Your service as a board member will be most rewarding to you, and you will serve the organization best, if you are able to focus on your key duties:

- **Attend all meetings** — The skills you bring to the table do not matter if you are not present. Board members who repeatedly miss meetings should be candidates for removal. Their absence can drain the morale of other board members — and ultimately the morale of others in the organization.
- **Be prepared and informed** — Before each meeting, read the meeting materials sent to you. Come prepared to ask questions and make comments. Stay informed of trends and developments in the type of work that the organization performs so that you can bring a broader perspective. In addition, stay abreast of good governance practices as they evolve.
- **Speak your mind and ask hard questions** — Some organizations have suffered because board members were more concerned about appearances than they were about discussing difficult or challenging issues. But you must address them when they arise. As a board member, your primary responsibility is to protect the good name of the organization and to ensure that the organization's staff and money are being used consistent with good practice.
- **Take responsibility for your stewardship of the organization's assets** — The board must make certain that funds are used consistent with the intent of those who have donated them. The board must satisfy itself that sufficient funds are allocated to each function and that those allocations are consistent with its own priorities.

- **Watch others at the table** — Check to make sure that other board members are pulling their weight. Only when the full board acts in cohesion can the organization’s mission be fully accomplished.
- **Remember that integrity is paramount** — The most important asset of your organization is its good name. The second most important asset is the confidence of its donors and sponsors in the organization’s capacity to manage and spend funds prudently. The board should make certain — both in its own practices and policies and those of the staff — that integrity remains the highest priority. If the board sets a good example, the organization will most likely follow it.



Board member roles, responsibilities and liabilities

Critical distinctions

- **Board vs. management** — Both the organization’s board and its management must have a clear understanding of the distinctive roles of each. Much confusion (and sometimes conflict) occurs when those distinctions aren’t clear.

Boards typically reserve these functions for themselves:

- Setting board policy
- Approving new programs or deleting old ones
- Selection, oversight and compensation of the CEO
- Approval of the operating budget recommended by management
- Oversight of the endowment

Management is generally responsible for these functions:

- Selection and supervision of staff
- Development, recommendation and implementation of the budget
- Establishment of operating procedures

Board members do not have individual power or authority. Instead, these powers reside with the full board of directors. Occasionally, a board member may become heavily involved in a particular program and work closely with the organization’s staff. In that situation, the board member should report periodically to the full board to keep it informed. The board sets standards to measure how well management performs — and initiates actions, when necessary, to see that management carries out its obligations.

- **Committees vs. the full board** — Most of the board’s work should be done by its committees. Thus, individual board members will become knowledgeable in key areas of the board’s work, and the full board will spend less time on any one issue or set of issues. It is good practice to follow a committee’s recommendations unless there are compelling reasons not to do so. Board committees are likely to include budget, finance, audit, personnel, nominating, and program or mission.
- **The external auditor is accountable to the board, not to management** — All boards have a fiduciary responsibility to:
 - know the amount of assets available to the organization;
 - verify that the use of those assets is consistent with the mission of the organization, regulatory requirements and accepted accounting principles; and take steps to minimize the possibility of fraud or conflict of interest

Commissioning an external audit by a qualified public accounting firm is a key element of the board’s responsibility. The accounting firm should be selected by the audit committee on behalf of the board and should present the audited financial statements to both the committee and/or the full board. Grant Thornton’s *Not-for-profit audit committee handbook* booklet provides further information.

Board member roles, responsibilities and liabilities

Liability

A board member has a fiduciary obligation to the organization. He or she must act with good faith and loyalty — and always exclusively in the best interests of the organization. To guard against abuse of the good-faith presumption, board members serving not-for-profit organizations face several kinds of liability:

- Liability to third parties, such as contractors providing services to the organization
- Liability to the organization and its members
- Statutory liability

A board has a legal duty to conserve and protect the organization's assets. This duty carries with it legal risk, which is why many not-for-profit organizations carry D&O liability insurance. Employers are aware of the potentially unfavorable consequences of board-related litigation; indeed,

some employers do not permit their employees to sit on boards of organizations that do not have adequate D&O liability insurance. A new board member should know whether the organization carries D&O insurance, and the extent of the insurance coverage. It may be prudent for a board member or the organization as a whole to have the D&O policy evaluated by independent legal counsel. For additional safety, some states have adopted volunteer-protection statutes for the benefit of uncompensated board members and trustees. Board members may consider obtaining an individual umbrella policy.

Claims against individual board members of a not-for-profit organization can arise from multiple scenarios:

- Employees claiming wrongful termination or other violation of their rights
- Governmental entities claiming waste of assets or violation of reporting regulations

- Environmental damage from toxic waste on property an organization acquires
- Service recipients claiming negligent supervision or improper selection of employees and volunteers
- Violation of regulations regarding lobbying efforts



Both federal and state regulations prohibit board members from engaging in improper dealings with not-for-profit organizations and from knowingly approving excess-benefit transactions involving organization insiders. Indeed, board members taking such actions are subject to financial penalties. For more information, see “Intermediate sanctions,” p. 18. Likewise, conflicts of interest can be the basis of liability action against a board member. If a board member receives an improper or undisclosed personal financial benefit as a result of the organization’s transactions, he or she may be liable to the organization.

The idea of personal liability should not frighten anyone away from board service. But it behooves board members to familiarize themselves with the protection afforded by the state — and by the organization itself — and to exercise care in making decisions.

Keeping the board effective

Managing the makeup, skills and education of the board is an ongoing process. Boards should not only consider their current composition, but also plan for future membership and leadership — and, at the same time, evaluate overall board effectiveness. In what ways can they do this?

- **Recruiting, retaining and rewarding good board members** — The organization’s success depends in part on the board’s commitment. While board members are sometimes appointed by external agencies or elected by constituents, in most cases the board selects its new members directly. A key board responsibility, in those cases, is to recruit board members who will help the organization achieve its mission and remain active in the board’s work. The board should be attentive to ways to make board service exciting and rewarding, including formal recognition of achievement.
- **Providing continuity of board leadership** — The board should have a succession plan, formal or informal, that identifies future board chairs, committee chairs and other leadership roles.
- **Balancing the skills of board members** — Optimally, each board member should possess at least one of several essential skills — budgeting, financial management, investments, human resources and legal matters — as well as a working knowledge of the substantive programmatic work of the organization.
- **Evaluating the board’s effectiveness** — The board should create processes to determine whether it is functioning effectively in support of the organization’s purpose. The board should ask whether it is following the practices

recommended in this booklet, as well as other practices that board members collectively agree are important. The board should then develop one or more evaluation tools to facilitate the assessment. The board might also find ways to ask its various stakeholders to assess its effectiveness.

- **Managing the board's size** — The size of a board represents a difficult balance between diversity of views and skills, and the board's functional effectiveness. The smaller the board, the more likely that it will be able to perform its functions comprehensively, particularly as they relate to management. The larger the board, the more diverse its membership will be, but the less likely it will be to reach clear decisions quickly. Larger boards typically rely on the committees to work through issues and to report to the full board.

- **Monitoring board continuity and turnover** — Both continuity and turnover are essential features of good board membership practices. Continuity provides institutional memory. Turnover brings fresh perspective. In general, it is good practice to set term limits for board members.



Keeping the board effective

- **Providing opportunities for education and orientation** — The education of board members should not be limited to their orientation. On a regular basis, time should be set aside to cover topics such as the predicted effects of pending legislation, tips for reading financial statements, or fundraising techniques for board members. Periodically, the board should ask itself important questions: Are we true to our mission? Is our mission well-defined? Boards should also have annual retreats to discuss the alignment of the organization’s mission with its goals.
- **Planning in advance of meetings** — Efficient and effective meetings are essential to a well-functioning board. Boards should ensure that meeting agendas are planned well in advance. Consent agendas are being used more often to reduce the time spent on nonessential issues — that is, items that require formal board approval but for which there is no need for board discussion before taking a vote. The board meeting thus involves only the discussion of critical issues and the presentation of resolutions requiring a board vote.

Accountability and integrity

A board member is a link between the not-for-profit organization and the public or membership that supports it and is served by it. That public is increasingly holding board members legally and ethically accountable for the actions or inactions of organizations.

The organization's most valuable asset is its good name, and a board member's top priority should be protecting its reputation. Good practice, as well as the expectations of donors and regulators, requires a high level of attention to the issues of financial reporting, controls and assessment of business risk. The board must be confident that adequate systems are in place for controlling, administering and planning the use of resources.

Policies

To mitigate potential risks, boards should consider instituting the following policies:

- **Code of ethics** — Board members should adopt a code of high standards in ethical behavior that applies to the board, management and staff across the organization.
- **Conflict of interest (and disclosure)** — The board should have a conflict-of-interest policy across the organization ensuring the independence of the board, management, staff, the external auditor and other vendors from one another, so that each entity performs only its role and is not compromised in any way.
- **Whistleblower** — The board should have a policy in place for board members, staff and other stakeholders to raise issues about the organization's ethical or financial practices. The policy should clarify how to raise such issues and how to prohibit retribution for raising them.

Accountability and integrity

Intermediate sanctions

The IRS monitors not-for-profit organizations and can impose intermediate sanctions for awarding unreasonable salaries and benefits or, alternatively, for allowing board members or other interested parties to provide goods or services to the organization for more than they are worth.

The test is whether the benefit provided to the insider (generally a trustee or staff member) exceeds the value of the consideration the organization receives. This consideration can consist of services provided in exchange for compensation. The IRS can impose a monetary sanction in cases of improper dealings involving organizations exempt under Section 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4).

In addition, as of January 1, 2010, board members who knowingly and willfully approve such a transaction are jointly and severally liable for a 10 percent tax, limited to \$20,000 per transaction. Insiders covered by the law include persons who have a substantial influence over the organization's affairs. This could include members of the governing body (the board), the CEO and CFO, and others who are determined to have such influence.

Once someone is covered by this definition, family members and any controlled businesses they own are also included. If the IRS imposes penalties, the details, including names and amounts, must be shown on Form 990 filings, which are available to the public.

As a board member, you need to make sure the organization has procedures in place to prevent conflicts of interest and transactions involving excess benefits and disqualified persons. D&O insurance policies may or may not cover these penalties.



The board — or a committee that has no conflicts of interest with the person whose transaction is under consideration — should approve all transactions involving insiders. You should also make sure that all compensation and benefits, including those provided to you as a board member, are properly disclosed on Form 990. To the extent that these compensation and benefit amounts are taxable, they should be reported on Form 1099 or Form W-2, as appropriate.

Failure to properly document and report compensation and benefits is likely to result in automatic violations of these rules. Benefits that are paid or provided but are not properly reported and disclosed are considered automatic excess benefits, regardless of the reasonableness of the amounts.

Accountability and integrity

Other regulatory/tax compliance issues

The board should ask management sufficient questions to satisfy itself that the organization is not violating laws or regulations made by the host of agencies that regulate the organization.

One example is unrelated business income (UBI). The IRS will impose a tax liability on certain activities of a not-for-profit organization if those activities are found to be business activities unrelated to the organization's tax-exempt purpose and not otherwise excluded from UBI in the Internal Revenue Code (IRC).

Not-for-profit organizations may face other tax issues:

- State, local and foreign taxes
- Charitable registrations
- Foreign regulatory filings pertaining to investments
- Escheat and unclaimed property laws

Internal controls

Internal controls enable the board and the organization to perform several functions:

- Verify that transactions are properly authorized
- Ensure that assets are safeguarded
- Confirm that transactions are properly recorded and reported
- Prevent fraud and misstatements related to financial reporting

The board needs to ask questions and be vigilant about the effectiveness of the organization's internal controls and operating procedures. Items under consideration should include receipt of funds, personnel and payroll procedures, authorization of disbursements, and handling of cash. The board should ask questions not only about financial resources and personnel procedures, but also about assets such as buildings, land, equipment and securities.

An effective internal control system will have a well-designed set of policies and procedures relating not only to transactions but also to record retention. Important files and information should be maintained and remain accessible for a reasonable period of time.

High-quality internal financial reporting

The board should expect to receive from management regular financial reports comparing financial results with budgetary predictions and reporting on the status of assets. The board should also expect management to make financial disclosures — consistent with the board’s own reports — to members, contributors and other stakeholders.

To meet the board’s need to evaluate the effectiveness of programs, many not-for-profit organizations provide detailed internal statements that directly relate expenses shown on their financial statements to specific programs or functions. This functional approach makes it easier for board members to analyze and compare costs.

The external audit

To provide the board and the organization’s other constituencies with confidence in the financial information and internal controls of the organization, the board should appoint a respected public accounting firm to conduct an audit of the financial records and processes of the organization.

The public accounting firm is responsible for providing the board with an independent opinion. Independence both from the board and from management is an essential feature of good practice with respect to the external audit. Neither management nor board members should attempt to influence the opinion of the public accounting firm.

Financial stewardship

While the corporate standard for success — profitability — may not be appropriate in not-for-profit organizations, sound financial management is crucial to the vitality of every not-for-profit organization. Strong financial management is a necessary tool in competing for every contributed dollar. An organization that is soundly managed is more likely to attract that dollar than one that is not.

Several aspects of financial management are of special concern to not-for-profit board members: budgeting, overseeing assets and raising revenue.

Budgeting and financial planning

The budget translates the hard-to-quantify goals of a not-for-profit organization into measurable terms. It can be a powerful device for monitoring the organization's activities. This function is especially important because revenue shortfalls or uncontrolled expenses can sap the confidence of the organization's stakeholders and supporters.

Generally, the full board of an organization is involved only at certain stages in the budget process: establishing overall goals and activities that set the budget process in motion, approving the final budget, and comparing the organization's financial results with both its budget and its goals.

The board usually has a finance or budget committee that provides detailed oversight of these critical functions. This committee reviews management's recommendations for the next year's budget. Management handles most of the actual budgeting, with the CFO or budget director driving the process.

Committee members should ask difficult questions both of themselves and of management:

- What priorities are reflected in the proposed budget?
- What trade-offs have been made?
- How realistic is it for us to expect to be able to raise X number of dollars in contributions, fees or membership dues this year?
- How realistic is it for us to expect to increase the cost of services by Y percent?

Not surprisingly, when difficult questions must be asked, the budget may go through several revisions before reaching the full board. At that point, the extent to which the budget is further revised may vary widely from organization to organization. Sometimes boards are comfortable with making a decision based only on management's recommendations, and many budgets require few changes by the full board. Even so, a board should be fully aware of the organization's financial condition. To that end, it is the board's prerogative to ask difficult questions regarding the budget and to request revisions as needed. Further, the board must compare the financial estimates and goals established in the budget with actual results and investigate variances.

Financial stewardship

Overseeing assets

The audited financial statements provide a clear measurement of the organization's financial assets; therefore, the board should evaluate those statements closely. Any significant increase or decrease in assets should be examined in terms of the organization's overall effectiveness. The board should find ways to assess the quality of the organization's human and physical assets, even though this is not reflected in the financial statements. Another financial asset requiring special attention by the board is the organization's endowment. The board should make certain that the endowment is overseen and managed in accordance with good practice — and that its investment return equals or exceeds that of endowments held by organizations of comparable size and scope.

A board faced with a severe financial shortfall should seek recommendations from the CEO and then choose the route best suited to getting the organization back on its feet.

Raising revenue

Most not-for-profit organizations rely on fundraising activities to provide financial resources for their programs. Some organizations set minimum fundraising requirements for board members; these standards are often referred to as give-or-get policies. For example, to remain on the board, a member would be required to raise \$5,000 annually through making personal contributions or soliciting them from others.

Organizational fundraising usually includes annual campaigns to support the operating budget and capital campaigns to raise funds for facilities and the endowment. Board involvement in capital campaigns is critical to their success, with board members providing personal leadership and making personal gifts.

The board must monitor both the management of funds and the cost of raising them. The management of funds includes the appropriate recording of gifts, the monitoring of cash vs. pledges, and decisions about using particular gifts.

The cost of raising funds must be closely watched and accurately reported to ensure its reasonableness and conformity to industry standards.

Tax-exempt status

While more than 20 categories of tax exemption are provided for by the IRS, most not-for-profit organizations derive their tax exemptions from one of five IRC sections:

- **Section 501(c)(3)** — Charitable, educational, religious or scientific organizations
- **Section 501(c)(4)** — Social welfare organizations
- **Section 501(c)(5)** — Labor unions
- **Section 501(c)(6)** — Trade and professional associations
- **Section 501(c)(7)** — Social clubs

Each organization is subject to rules that control the types of activities it can carry on within its particular tax-exempt classification.

The extent to which the IRC allows lobbying, for instance, varies among the tax-exempt classifications. Lobbying — attempting to influence legislation — is often an integral part of a 501(c)(6) organization’s purpose. A 501(c)(3) organization may lobby, but its lobbying is limited to an “insubstantial amount” of its activities. A 501(c)(3) organization may, however, make an election under Section 501(h) of the IRC to quantify the amount it can spend on lobbying.

Perhaps the major difference among types of not-for-profit organizations is that 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) organizations must have an outward focus and provide some type of public good.

Organizations exempt under Sections 501(c)(5), 501(c)(6) or 501(c)(7) are inwardly focused. Their purpose requires them to act for the benefit of their members.

Financial stewardship

As part of good financial stewardship, a board member of a not-for-profit organization must understand the purpose of the organization's tax exemption and what types of activities would threaten it. The tax exemption itself is often the organization's greatest asset, and losing it would be devastating.

Political activities, as opposed to legislative activities, pose problems for not-for-profit organizations. For example, 501(c)(3) organizations are strictly prohibited from using funds to attempt to influence the election of a candidate for office. Any use of funds for such a purpose is grounds for revocation of a 501(c)(3) organization's tax exemption. Other organizations remain exempt but are subject to excise tax if they spend money for political purposes. Since neither result is desirable, board members must monitor an organization's political activities and policies carefully.

Private inurement can also lead the IRS to revoke an organization's tax-exempt status. Private inurement results when an organization's assets or earnings are used for the benefit of an individual, as opposed to the organization itself. For example, private inurement may result if an organization pays compensation at a level that is unreasonably high compared with the level of effort and responsibility of the recipient.

Again, board members must monitor the activities of the organization and its officers to ensure that no private inurement occurs.

Full disclosure

The public has a large stake in the operations of the not-for-profit sector. Various tax exemptions granted to not-for-profit organizations — such as property tax exemptions and sales tax exclusions — represent billions of dollars in lost tax revenue. Deductions of donations to 501(c)(3) organizations disclosed in personal income tax filings alone account for billions more in lost tax dollars each year.

In exchange for these benefits, not-for-profit organizations are expected to provide full financial disclosure, implement efficient management practices and engage in ethical behavior. Contributors and other stakeholders are no longer satisfied with glossy annual reports.

To obtain the detailed information they're looking for, many potential contributors and members examine an organization's Form 990 filings.

Charity watchdogs, the IRS and organizations themselves are required to make copies of these informational returns available to anyone who asks for them.

Form 990 disclosures include:

- The names and compensation of an organization's directors and officers
- Details of financial transactions between the organization and a board member or a group with which he or she is affiliated
- Information regarding the organization's assets, liabilities, income sources, revenues and expenses

In addition to making Form 990 filings available, boards should consider posting clear and concise financial narratives, charts and other disclosures on the organization's website.

Operating procedures

Now that you have a well-educated, well-rounded board that is kept informed of its duties, responsibilities and liabilities, what's next? To effectively oversee the organization's operations, boards should employ a number of strategies and procedures.

Committees

Boards generally appoint committees to focus on particular areas of responsibility. Committees are essentially subsets of the full board. Specialists in one or two issues can examine them in detail during committee meetings — thus minimizing the time the full board must devote to those issues and maximizing the effectiveness of the full board.

Some committees typically focus on the organization's purpose, programs and mission. Other committees are more general in nature: finance and budget, audit, investment, executive, development/fundraising, and

nominating. The nominating committee is often appointed to select candidates for open board positions. And a board's executive committee is often empowered to act for the full board between meetings.

Boards should guard against appointing too many standing committees. Sometimes a problem arises for which a task force or an ad hoc committee may be more appropriate than a standing committee. A task force or an ad hoc committee is similar to a standing committee, except that it is not a permanent appointment. Once it recommends a solution to a problem or completes its project, the task force or ad hoc committee disbands.

All board members should serve on one or more board committees based on their skills and talents. A new board member should come prepared with an idea of which committee he or she would most like to join.

Information flow to board members

If the board is to have a significant role in governing an organization, and if board members are to minimize their exposure to legal liability, the information available to them about the organization's affairs is crucial.

Board members should ask themselves several questions:

- Is the information adequate without being overwhelming?
- Is it available when needed?
- Are the special needs of the board of directors considered?
- Above all, is the information accurate?

An effective communication system has several components:

- A specific agenda for each meeting
- Advance distribution of as much material as possible; preferably material should reach each board member at least one week before the meeting

- A standard report package for each board meeting
- Periodic, timely mailing by the CEO of key letters, memos, releases, industry reports and presentations; topics should include budgets, profit plans, the organization's long-range plan, significant policies and procedures, and committee reports
- Meeting minutes, all of which should be reviewed for accuracy

Obviously, much of the information a prudent board requires is of a financial nature: current operating results, comparisons of actual with budget, a statement of financial position, and the CEO's or CFO's report. Quarterly income projections are useful for helping board members anticipate problems and judge actual performance. Board members may also benefit from a review of cash and working capital forecasts, capital expenditure plans, employee pension plan information, and, of course, data pertinent to specific problems or concerns the organization faces.

Operating procedures

Preparing for board meetings

A board member owes it to himself or herself, the other board members, and the organization to be thoroughly apprised of all issues. A board member should be familiar with the information provided in advance of a board meeting. The amount of preparation time will vary from board to board, depending on the nature of the organization and the problems it faces. Spending one hour in preparation for each hour of the board meeting is a good rule of thumb. A board member should arrive at board meetings prepared to ask intelligent, probing questions and to take the initiative in dealing with the organization's problems. A board member should always keep in mind that he or she will be held legally accountable for actions or inactions.

If after reviewing the materials in the information packet, a board member has additional questions or needs further clarification, he or she should contact the chairperson and discuss any concerns before the board meeting. The chairperson can then be prepared if further discussion at the meeting is warranted.

How to build a better board

Evaluations of each board member should cover such subjects as attendance at board and committee meetings, participation in board discussions, constructive criticisms and suggestions, preparedness for meetings, and availability to the CEO.

If evaluations reveal underperformance, the chairperson is responsible for discussing the matter with the board member, giving that person the choice between improving his or her performance or resigning. If that conversation does not produce the desired results, the underperforming board member's name should be withheld from the list of candidates for renomination.

Board members also need to assess whether their committee chairs are properly and effectively leading the committee and helping the organization meet its goals. To form an effective board, board members must have a clear understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the overall organization, its mission, and what it seeks to accomplish. Such an understanding can be gained through nothing less than a comprehensive review of the organization and its people. Only after this review will it be possible to establish a profile for the type of individual and specific expertise the board may lack.

Board criteria and selection

Board members may have diverse backgrounds and come from varying socioeconomic levels. They frequently hold full-time managerial positions in the for-profit sector and bring skills developed there to the board.

But no matter their individual backgrounds, those on the board should collectively possess a number of critical

traits, many of which are obvious: honesty, good judgment, common sense, perspective, conscientiousness, independence, intelligence, objectivity, the willingness to take positions and to question, and the courage to act. Board members must also have good people skills. They must be able to judge people and their performance accurately — and, at the same time, they must get along well with others.

Overall management expertise is important. Board members should be able to understand and interpret financial and operating reports and help form organizational policies, plans and objectives. Good board members should be able to assess their information needs and be willing to learn about the organization and develop familiarity with the industry and marketplace in which the organization operates. In addition, board members should be familiar with the federal, state and local laws that affect the organization.

Operating procedures

Board members should also be aware of their public and social responsibilities. Their actions and behavior should enhance the organization's reputation — and should certainly not detract from it.

It is rare to find all of those traits and qualifications in any one board member, but the board as a whole should possess them. A prudent board screens for critical attributes, just as management vets and interviews prospective employees. Candidates should be interviewed by several board members, including the chairperson.

Potential board members should be asked several key questions:

- Are they qualified and willing to serve?
- Will they be able to give the time and commitment necessary to complete the task?
- Are they able and willing to support the organization's fundraising?
- Will their appointment and performance reflect well on the organization and its mission?

Before selecting new members, a board should obtain:

- Biographical data concerning all candidates
- Candidate references provided by individuals not affiliated with the organization
- Signed conflict-of-interest statements and disclosures of any potential conflicts of interest

After a candidate has been approved, it is in the best interests of the organization to orient the new board member quickly to his or her role. The quicker the orientation, the more valuable the board member's relationship will be to others at the table.

The board member's role: A recap

Acting through the board as a whole, each board member fulfills several functions:

- Determines the organization's goals and policies
- Selects and evaluates the CEO
- Monitors the overall management of the organization
- Evaluates the organization's programs against its purposes
- Oversees financial management of the organization and participates in fundraising
- Serves as a link between the organization and its constituents

Demands on the board members of not-for-profit organizations continue to mount. Meeting these demands requires commitment of time and expertise, commitment to shaping the direction of the organization, and commitment to protecting the interests of the people who support it and are served by it.

When a not-for-profit organization faces financial or managerial difficulties, the expertise and contributions of the board can make recovery easier. And when an organization thrives, its board members can see the tangible benefits of their efforts.



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Organizations serving not-for-profit board members

American Society of Association Executives

www.asaenet.org

BoardSource

www.boardsource.org

Independent Sector

www.independentsector.org

Other Grant Thornton resources

- *Planned giving: A board member's perspective*
- *Not-for-profit audit committee handbook*
- *Grant Thornton national board governance survey for not-for-profit organizations*
- *Not-for-Profit Alerts and Special Bulletins*

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