



## Chapter 3

# Composition & Development

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Chapter 3 Summary: Composition & Development

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### INTRODUCTION

The board ensures the characteristics, qualifications, and experiences of board members effectively meet the organization's needs and are representative of the communities served. When the board is thoughtful about composition and development, the board can better provide organizational oversight needed to achieve the nonprofit's mission and steward valuable resources. Strong board composition makes certain the ideal people are in place with the skills and experiences needed to respond to new opportunities and challenges. Intentional board development can create space for community members served by the organization to bring their unique insights and experiences to the board.

## 1. UNDERSTANDING YOUR BOARD CULTURE

Regardless of the size of your organization, every volunteer, worker, donor, and funder that engages with your nonprofit will experience your board culture in some way. Culture is the way a group of people comes together. Your nonprofit's board culture stems from your procedures, policies, and practices. Your board culture matters in your organization's overall ability to achieve its mission, create meaningful engagement, and develop lasting relationships.

Aspects of culture are both visible and invisible, and culture is often compared to an iceberg because 90% of an iceberg is unseen below the waterline. Your organization should aspire to create a board culture that provides a stable foundation for the nonprofit, supports your mission and values, and welcomes board members with diverse experiences, abilities, and skills. You can explore the visible and invisible parts of your culture to better understand where the board is now and what changes may be needed. Strong board culture is vital to every nonprofit.

In an organization, culture includes the systems of knowledge shared by individuals engaged with the board – the values, beliefs, attitudes, and roles individuals take within the nonprofit. Culture, in general, shows up in three ways: artifacts, behaviors, and underlying values. We break this down with the following examples related to boards.

### **A. Artifacts**

Artifacts are the “stuff” of the organization. This includes things that someone could see by moving around your workplace or interacting with your board. Some artifacts are less visible and may be known by specific board or staff members. Artifacts can be tools, documents, procedures, and more. Together, your artifacts represent visible or accessible indicators of your board and organization's policies and procedures. Artifacts may include:

- Incorporation documents
- Bylaws
- Whistleblower Policy
- Conflict of Interest Policy
- Board member reimbursement policy
- Board orientation packet

### **B. Behaviors**

Behaviors are what you can observe or witness when people interact with the board's systems and implement procedures that are in place. Behaviors may include:

- Conversations and casual comments
- Participation and questions asked in meetings
- How people interact across the organization, like staff and board
- How individuals and committees respond when faced with a challenge or conflict

### *C. Underlying values*

Underlying values are invisible elements that nevertheless shape a culture. A nonprofit may say having a board membership reflective of the community served by the organization is important, a priority, and crucial to advancing the work. The underlying beliefs must exist so that everyone on the board matches their words with aligned actions. The invisible elements may include:

- Values related to what matters within a board and organization
- Assumptions that common understandings are shared
- Attitudes about recordkeeping
- Attitudes about acceptable oversight behaviors
- Unspoken rules
- Beliefs and habits

### D. Assess your culture

The first step in strengthening your board's culture is to assess your current culture. Use the following "Know Your Board Culture" worksheet to note how you would describe your culture across the three aspects (artifacts, behaviors, and underlying values). Then describe how you want your board culture to be in the future. Remember, you can change the culture.

#### KNOW YOUR BOARD CULTURE WORKSHEET

We experience culture in three ways: through the **artifacts** (documents, tools, etc.) that we use/see, through **behaviors** that we do/see, and through **underlying values** that we do not see but we experience.

**Current Board Culture: Where do you see alignment with your written policies, procedures, and practices across the three aspects of culture?**

<b>Artifacts</b> Documents or other "stuff" that you can touch	<b>Behaviors</b> Behaviors and actions you can see and experience	<b>Values</b> Attitudes and assumptions you experience but do not see

**Future Board Culture: What would you like to add/change to strengthen your board's culture?**

<b>Artifacts</b>	<b>Behaviors</b>	<b>Values</b>

**Next Steps:** Now that you have thought about your board's culture and what you would like it to be in the future, write down three actions you can take to move towards that desired culture.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

## 2. RECRUITMENT, SELECTION, & ORIENTATION

The board should recruit and select individuals with a strong commitment to the organization's mission and success. The board should have a clearly documented process to recruit, select, and orient new board members to make sure the ideal people are in place and have access to the right information to best serve the organization. Your board's plan should describe the skills, experiences, connections, etc. you are looking for in new board members. The recruitment and selection process needs to align with board bylaws and governance documents as well as minimum requirements set by the Washington Nonprofit Corporation Act.

### A. Recruitment

As you think about recruitment, begin by identifying an ideal size and composition of board members that allows the board to meet its responsibilities and make informed decisions. Also, set clear procedures for term lengths, limits, rotation (term staggering), and board member removal, which should all be outlined in the bylaws.

To meet the Washington Nonprofit Corporation Act requirements, 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organizations must have at least three board members (although, fulfilling board responsibilities may be challenging with such a small board). Without a strong board chair or president, having a large board (generally, greater than 15 members) may also pose challenges. In considering board officer positions, the board needs a president, secretary, and treasurer. Under the Washington Nonprofit Corporation Act, the president and the secretary may not be the same person. If a staff member serves on the board, their service is in an *ex officio* capacity, and they do not vote.

Assess your board and organization's current stage of development and think about where you want to be in the next couple of years. Make an intentional plan for outreach and relationship building that leads to new board member opportunities in support of the organization's growth areas, unmet needs, and deepening community connections. Creating a board matrix that lists current board members' skills, experiences, connections, areas of interest, personal demographics, board terms, and more can help you develop an outreach and recruitment plan. The board, or board development committee if you have one, should discuss categories and information to capture as well as the preferred formatting that will best support recruitment.

Ideally, your board membership is reflective of the community served by the organization and includes members with diverse skills, expertise, and experiences. Before beginning community outreach and recruitment efforts aimed at increasing board member diversity, the board should undertake deeper reflective work to understand the current board culture and operations. Also, consider if there are volunteers or individuals already involved in your nonprofit's work who would be ideal for the board. By taking these purposeful actions, the board may identify candidates or changes that need to occur to create a welcoming environment that supports all board members' participation.

The ability to clearly describe the board service opportunity, and the responsibilities if selected, is an important part of recruitment. Having a board member position description, a board application form, and any other key information pulled together for prospective board members is helpful. The following worksheet may assist you in crafting your own board member position description.

**ACTIVITY: BUILD YOUR BOARD MEMBER POSITION DESCRIPTION**

Whether you have a board member position description currently or not, taking a moment to pause and assess the position can be helpful. If you are creating a board member position description for the first time, use the prompts to spark and organize your thoughts. If you already have a position description, use this activity to identify any items that may be missing or need clarification.

**Title:** What is the position title? Is this a position description for a general board member or for a board officer role?

**Purpose:** What is the purpose of the position as it relates to the board and organization?

**Term Length & Time Commitment:** What is/are the term length(s) for the position? What is the anticipated time commitment for the position (i.e., 5 hours a month plus attendance at occasional events)?

**Skills, Expertise, & Experiences:** Thinking about your board and organization's current stage of development and where you want to go, are there any specific skills, expertise, and experiences board members need or must be open to learning?

**General Responsibilities:** What are the general responsibilities and expectations for the position?

**Specific Tasks:** Are there specific tasks the position may be responsible for completing or overseeing?

**Other:** For the position, are there other duties, important pieces of information, or guidance that should be included?

## ***B. Selection***

Creating a selection process that provides a positive experience for everyone involved takes forethought and intentional design. This includes responding to prospective board members in a timely manner, even those not invited to join the board. If you have new board member candidates who are not selected, those individuals are still part of your nonprofit's larger community, and you want continued good relations even if they are not on the board now. Remember, the first significant interaction with a new board member candidate may be through the selection process. Spend time planning, preparing, and shaping a deliberate selection process. When you complete your selection process it is important to thank all candidates by phone, email, or letter.

Unconscious or implicit bias is inescapable in a selection process, and your goal will be to minimize this as much as possible. During the selection planning process, you may decide to assemble a selection committee or team of people connected to your nonprofit. Think about the selection committee size – a few people provide more perspectives to the process, but too many people involved can be intimidating for a candidate. During the selection process, ensure you ask the same questions of each candidate. Setup a standard selection assessment or evaluation format that is transparent and explainable.

Before you begin reviewing new board member applications, take time as a team to discuss and question your implicit biases. Board members may be influenced by a candidate's appearance, age, manners, or other factors in their initial impression. Let go of snap judgments and dig deeper to make sure you are inviting the best person for the role to join the board.

### C. Orientation

You made your selection, now is the time to onboard and set the new board members up for success. There are many board responsibilities and details to initially convey, so take time to prepare for your new board members to start. Also, consider how your board culture and organizational values tie into creating a welcoming environment for new board members.



#### ACTIVITY: BOARD ORIENTATION CHECKLIST

Sourced from Technical Assistance for Community Services (2004) and adapted into the following worksheet, the Board Orientation Checklist provides a solid starting place for developing your nonprofit's own orientation process. Review each of the checklist items, mark whether this is something your board currently does, and capture any notes or next steps in the space provided.

Orientation Actions	Included in your orientation?	Notes & Next Steps
<b>General – Board Orientation Process</b>		
New Board members receive written notice of their selection to the board stating dates their term begins and ends, regular meeting dates, times, places, and information about the board orientation process	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Special meeting for new board members	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Orientation packet	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Personal phone call or meeting with an experienced board member	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Follow-up personal contact after the first three months of board service	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	



Orientation Actions	Included in your orientation?	Notes & Next Steps
<b>Board Orientation Packet</b>		
Statement of purpose or mission (if developed and adopted by the board)	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Brief overview of organization programs and services	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Organization annual report with financial statements for the past fiscal year	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Up-to-date copy of the bylaws	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Personnel policies in brief, or brief overview of personnel system for larger organization including: staff organization chart, number of professional and non-professional staff, identification of any unions or employee bargaining associations, date of last major revision of personnel policies	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Policy statement and procedures formally adopted by the board	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Abbreviations and acronyms of agencies and programs with which the organization is connected	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
List of all board members' names, addresses, phone numbers, and terms of office	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	

Orientation Actions	Included in your orientation?	Notes & Next Steps
Committees: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>List of committees with chairperson identified</li> <li>If committees have regular meeting times and places, these are included</li> <li>Board organization chart showing committee and sub-committee structure</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Most recent financial statements and current annual budget	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Minutes for most recent board meeting	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Listing of facilities owned or rented by the organization for operations, including address, staff member in charge, and general purpose of the facility	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
<b>Board Orientation Meeting</b>		
Opportunity for personal introductions among new and experienced board members	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
More formal introductions of new board members by the selection committee highlight new board members' background, skills, and experiences	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Brief presentations by experienced board members explaining board role and procedures	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Brief presentation by staff about scope of organization's services	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	

Orientation Actions	Included in your orientation?	Notes & Next Steps
Structured opportunity for small group discussion by interest areas (i.e., financial, personnel, programs, planning, fundraising)	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Clear statement of board member expectations including role in organization fundraising	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Open-ended opportunity for questions from new board members	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
<b>Personal Contact with Experienced Board Member</b>		
Discussion of new board member preferences for committee assignment	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Brief explanation on upcoming significant board decisions or events	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Specific commitment to greet the new board member at the next board meeting and provide personal introductions to board members with common interests	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
<b>Follow-Up Contact after Three Months of Service</b>		
Opportunity for general comments about board service so far	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Inquiry into involvement with committees if no involvement yet; discussion of barriers and problem solving	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Request for feedback on orientation process	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	

### ***D. Conflict of interest***

The board needs to ensure individual board members do not have any undocumented conflicts of interest that would affect the organization's wellbeing. The board's approved Conflict of Interest Policy should be reviewed and signed annually by all board members. A reasonable effort must be made to determine board independence. At least a majority of the board needs to be independent. Generally, this means that board members (or their family members) do not receive compensation (other than reimbursement for board-related expenses) or contracts with the organization. Loans to board members are specifically prohibited.

## **3. EVALUATION & BOARD DEVELOPMENT**

Along with a process to coordinate recruitment, selection, and orientation of new board members, the board should establish a plan for evaluation and ongoing learning. Each year the board should reflect on their own practices, celebrate achievements, and create plans around areas of growth.

### ***A. Why is board evaluation important?***

Establishing an annual process to assess or evaluate the board's effectiveness can help identify areas that need clarification, potential skill or experience gaps on the board, and topics for ongoing board learning. Evaluating your work as a board and as an individual board member may bring up some uneasy feelings. Talk as a board to create a shared understanding around how an evaluation process will help strengthen board practices, ultimately supporting the advancement of the organization's mission.

### ***B. Evaluation approaches***

There are many approaches to board evaluation, and a good starting place is a self-assessment process. The National Council of Nonprofits has a resource page on [Self-Assessments for Nonprofit Boards](#) that includes practice pointers and a variety of resources. In addition, there are sample board self-assessments included in the resources accompanying this guide.

**ACTIVITY**

**Your turn:** As a board member, a simple first step is to assess your own board service. Read each question and think about whether this is something you currently do. If you answer yes to the following questions, you are likely fulfilling your board member responsibilities. If you mark no or not sure, you have just identified an area for growth. Use the space provided to write notes and next steps you may want to take. This activity is adapted from the National Council of Nonprofits Individual Board Member Self-Evaluation form.

Self-Evaluation Question	Do I do this?	Notes & Next Steps
Do I understand and support the mission of the organization?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not sure	
Am I knowledgeable about the organization's programs and services?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not sure	
Do I follow trends and important developments related to the organization?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not sure	
Do I assist in organizational fundraising and/or actively participate in board giving through pathways set by the board?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not sure	
Do I read and understand the organization's financial statements?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not sure	
Do I have a good working relationship with the executive director?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not sure	
Do I recommend individuals for service on the board?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not sure	
Do I prepare for and participate in board meetings and committee meetings?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not sure	
Do I act as an ambassador for the organization in the community?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not sure	
Do I find serving on the board a satisfying and rewarding experience?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not sure	

### ***C. Maintaining a strong board***

Strong boards reflect on their own practices, celebrate achievements, and create plans around identified growth areas. Convening a board development committee to coordinate the recruitment, selection, and orientation process as well as evaluation and learning may benefit your board. Based on your annual board assessment/evaluation, develop a learning plan that addresses your board's prioritized needs. Weaving the learning topics into board meetings is a great approach and an opportunity to engage different board members throughout the year to lead learning activities.

Generally, there are three areas of board learning that should be included in your plan.

- Learning about your organization (programs, services, etc.)
- Learning about nonprofit practices (finance, advocacy, fundraising, etc.)
- Learning about the larger cause in which your nonprofit is working

Lastly, think about how your organization trains and develops board officers. Consider how your board can strengthen pathways board members can take towards officer positions and mentoring opportunities when members step into these vital roles.



1. With a clearly documented process to recruit, select, and orient new board members, the board makes sure the ideal people are in place and have access to the right information to best serve the organization.
2. Recruitment and selection of new board members focus on individuals with a strong commitment to the mission and success of the organization.
3. The board needs to make certain individual board members do not have any undocumented conflicts of interest that would affect the nonprofit's wellbeing.
4. The board needs enough people serving to fulfill responsibilities, which includes clear leadership with officer positions. Board member and officer positions are outlined in writing.



**Here are some questions to think about:**

- What opportunities and challenges could the board prepare for through an intentional recruitment and selection process?
- How could better orientation help prepare new board members for their role overseeing and advocating for the nonprofit?
- What role does your nonprofit play in the community? How do you prepare board members to serve as ambassadors for the organization within the community?

**Reflections**




**Next steps:**

- Scan through the [Harvard Implicit Association Test](#) offerings. Choose 2-3 tests to take and schedule some uninterrupted time to take the tests. Review your results and think about how your implicit biases may affect your selection of new board members.
- Review your nonprofit's board orientation process. Then check out the following resources for more tips and practices to enhance your current process.
  - National Council of Nonprofits – [Board Orientation](#)
  - Joan Garry Consulting – [A Template for a Great Board Orientation](#)