

Coloring Outside the Box: One Size Does Not
Fit All in Nonprofit Governance Workbook

Ten Dimensions that Shape Your Board

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Ten dimensions that shape your board

BACKGROUND

In 2006 Kim Sundet Vanderwall and Ellen Benavides had conversations with 117 leaders of 40 diverse nonprofits throughout Minnesota. Their findings can be found in “Coloring Outside the Box: One Size Does Not Fit All in Nonprofit Governance.” This workbook builds on what we learned; helping organizations intentionally shape their governance to fit their values, resources and community strengths.

ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Our advisors continued to ground and add richness to our work. Many thanks to:

David Nicholson, Former Board Chair of Ain Dah Yung (St. Paul, MN)

Jim Cook, Retired Executive Director of Sabathani Community Center (Minneapolis, MN)

Judith Alnes, Executive Director of MAP for Nonprofits (St. Paul, MN)

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Introduction

This workbook is designed to help you and your board: 1) understand the cultural and developmental context of your organization, 2) recognize strengths and challenges related to how you work together, and 3) consider alternative strategies that build on your strengths and guard against your challenges. **This is a tool to guide board discussion—there are no right or wrong answers.** Our goal is to provide you with a useful framework for being intentional about how you function as a board.

HOW TO USE THIS WORKBOOK

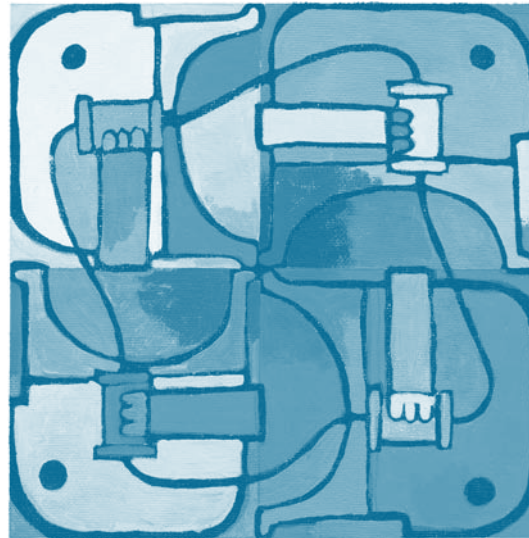
Our experience shows us that this tool is particularly effective at helping boards to quickly identify issues they've needed to discuss but perhaps couldn't put their fingers on. Start by taking the culture assessment on page iii. Once you've decided which dimensions are of interest to you, turn to the corresponding pages in the next section to frame a discussion on that dimension.

You could also schedule time at each board meeting to discuss the dimensions one by one. As you walk through this workbook, imagine where you might be now on each continuum. In some cases, you may also want to consider where you'd like to be in the future. Notice where you have agreement and where perceptions diverge. Differing perceptions play themselves out in the board room, whether acknowledged or not.

Each section includes suggestions for strengthening your practices. Finish by completing the goal setting worksheet on page 23. See the facilitator's guide for more information on how to walk through the full workbook with your board.

KEY RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS

While we advocate for being creative and flexible in how you approach your board responsibilities, the



community and the law expect the organization to do what it said it would do. You've been entrusted to be stewards of precious resources, and often, the well-being of the community depends upon you.

Boards can get pulled in many directions, which can distract the board from taking care of core responsibilities, especially in smaller organizations with fewer resources. So while there are many things you may choose to focus on as a board, **the following are five things that every board must take care of:**

- 1. Ensure that organizational resources are used to meet the mission as promised and in compliance with the law**
- 2. Position the organization to be strong in the future**
 - a. Ensure financial stability**
 - b. Ensure funding resources**
 - c. Plan strategically based on a clear understanding of community realities and trends**
- 3. Support and supervise the Executive Director**
- 4. Recruit, train and engage board members**
- 5. Be an ambassador for the organization**

OVERVIEW OF THE FRAMEWORK

Exactly **how** your board manages its responsibilities will vary according to the organization's size, experience and values—as well as those of the community you represent. **We've laid out ten dimensions to help you think about factors that influence how you approach your work and how this plays out in your boardroom.** These dimensions came from our recent research and experience in working with nonprofits¹, as well as from Geert Hofstede's² model of cultural dimensions. Most of these items can be thought about as a continuum. In each case, we describe (and present examples of potential strengths and challenges of) the extreme ends of the spectrum rather than describing in detail each point along the way. *Most organizations are somewhere in the middle.*

Following are the ten dimensions you'll explore about your organization and your board:

1. What kind of role does your board play? Is it hands-on, governing or hands-off? This relates to organizational life stage, size of the organization and philosophical approach, which impacts the kind of people you attract to serve on the board.

2. Who drives board activity? Is it primarily the Executive Director, the Board of Directors or a combination of both? This influences how well the board is able to do oversight and use organizational resources wisely.

3. How do you define your community base? It could be a cultural group (e.g., American Indians), a geographic community (e.g., rural, neighborhood), a group of people experiencing the same condition (e.g., homelessness), or any other descriptor.

4. How many people are in your community? The size of your community base impacts who you have to draw upon as leaders and how connected they may be to each other and the issues you face.

5. Who should lead your organization? Do you feel they should come from within your community? Or should your leadership reflect a broad cross-section of

people? Beliefs about self-determination and inclusiveness shape your options for recruiting and developing leaders.

6. What are your beliefs about power and authority? Boards of egalitarian organizations can and should look quite different from boards in hierarchical organizations. This dimension reflects how your organization demonstrates respect for all involved.

7. Is your culture more individualistic or more community-oriented? Is it more important for individuals in your organization/culture to focus on their own responsibilities or to respond to the needs of the community? This dimension influences board focus and attention.

8. Is the culture of your organization more task-oriented or relationship-oriented? When solving problems, is it more important to figure out the right answer or to maintain good relationships? This influences communication style and preferences for using people's time.

9. As a group, do you prefer structure or flexibility? This impacts how you organize yourself to be most productive and keep board members engaged.

10. Do you get more guidance for making decisions from traditions/the past or from contemporary models/future trends? This influences the age and style of leaders you engage, as well as how you respond and interact with your community.

KEY QUESTIONS

Within each dimension, you'll see the information organized according to the following questions:



Do we have the right people on our board and are they really engaged?



Do they know what their job is?



Is the board organized in a way that helps us do our job well?

¹ Vanderwall, Kim and Benavides, Ellen. *Coloring Outside the Box; One Size Does Not Fit All In Nonprofit Governance*, (2006)

² Hofstede, Geert. *Culture's Consequences; Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions and Organizations Across Nations* (2nd Ed.), Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage (2001)

Board culture assessment

The ten dimensions in this workbook describe factors that influence how you approach your work and how this plays out in your boardroom. Mark where you think your board is on each continuum. Then quickly review each dimension to identify those that you think are currently the most difficult for you and your board to discuss or are getting in the way of your board's effectiveness.

1. WHAT KIND OF ROLE DOES YOUR BOARD PLAY? Is it hands-on, governing or hands-off? This relates to organizational life stage, size of the organization and philosophical approach, which impacts the kind of people you attract to serve on the board.

The role your board plays is:



2. WHO DRIVES BOARD ACTIVITY? Is it primarily the Executive Director, the Board of Directors or a combination of both? This influences how well the board is able to do oversight and use organizational resources wisely.

Board activities are primarily driven by the:



3. HOW DO YOU DEFINE YOUR COMMUNITY BASE? It could be a cultural group (e.g., American Indians), a geographic community (e.g., rural, neighborhood), a group of people experiencing the same condition (e.g., homelessness), or any other descriptor.

You define your community base as: _____

4. HOW MANY PEOPLE ARE IN YOUR COMMUNITY BASE? The size of your community base impacts who you have to draw upon as leaders and how connected they may be to each other and the issues you face.

Your community is relatively:



5. WHO SHOULD LEAD YOUR ORGANIZATION? Do you feel they should come from within your community? Or should your leadership reflect a broad cross-section of people? Beliefs about self-determination and inclusiveness shape your options for recruiting and developing leaders.

Your belief about who should lead your organization is:



6. WHAT ARE YOUR BELIEFS ABOUT POWER AND AUTHORITY? Boards of egalitarian organizations can and should look quite different from boards in hierarchical organizations.

Your beliefs about power and authority are:

All members of the community
have equal status

People in positions of authority
should be respected and followed



7. IS YOUR CULTURE MORE INDIVIDUALISTIC OR MORE COMMUNITY-ORIENTED? Is it more important for individuals in your organization/culture to focus on their own responsibilities or to respond to the needs of the community? This dimension influences board focus and attention.

It is most important for individuals in your organization/culture to:

Focus on their own responsibilities

Respond to the needs of the community



8. IS THE CULTURE OF YOUR ORGANIZATION MORE TASK-ORIENTED OR RELATIONSHIP-ORIENTED?

When solving problems, is it more important to figure out the right answer or to maintain good relationships? This influences communication style and how you use people's time.

When solving problems, the most important factor is:

Figuring out the right answer

Maintaining good relationships



9. AS A GROUP, DO YOU PREFER STRUCTURE OR FLEXIBILITY? This impacts how you organize yourself to be most productive and keep board members engaged.

As a group, you prefer:

Structure

Flexibility



10. DO YOU GET MORE GUIDANCE FOR MAKING DECISIONS FROM TRADITIONS/THE PAST OR FROM CONTEMPORARY MODELS/FUTURE TRENDS? This influences the age and style of leaders you engage, as well as how you respond and interact with your community.

Your guidance for making decisions is based upon:

Traditions/the past

Contemporary or future trends



Notes

A closer look at the ten dimensions



1. What role does our board play?

	START-UP/HANDS-ON	POLICY
Description	Board members support the founder and act as hands-on volunteers to help make the founder's dream a reality. Board size is often pretty small and members are recruited from founder's circle.	Board focuses on big picture policy, accountability and evaluating organizational effectiveness. Board members are purposely recruited to represent a mix of skills and expertise with an emphasis on professionals.
Strengths	 Strong sense of passion and connection to the mission. Board members have usually been recruited by the founder and willingly dig in to help.	 A variety of skills/perspectives strengthens the board's ability to lead the organization.
	 Board members tend to feel very needed and engaged; willing to stretch beyond their specific role.	 The Executive Director is likely to get clear guidance and be given appropriate authority to do their job.
	 Simple and flexible organizational structure can allow for dynamic and engaged participation.	 Board members' focus on planning and financial oversight ensures long-term stability.
Potential challenges	 Since board members are mostly connected to the founder, they may lack broad reach in the community. People new to this country, in start-up organizations, or inexperienced with formal systems may be unaware of laws governing how nonprofits operate.	 May "professionalize" the board too much: recruit too heavily for specific expertise at the expense of other areas.
	 Board members may not know their fiduciary responsibilities. Loyalty/respect for founder may make it difficult to supervise the Executive Director. The board may not have agreement on role they should play in governance or fundraising.	 Governance and policy focus can feel disconnected from program and mission.
	 There is so much to do that work can feel chaotic. Mechanisms may not be in place to ensure compliance, which puts the organization at risk.	 Emphasis on measuring organizational effectiveness and policy issues can feel too theoretical or result in a focus on developing "check lists."
You might want to think about...	 Identifying skill sets needed on the board and recruiting from outside your circle to bring new skills on board.	 Creating opportunities to mentor new board members or others being groomed for leadership.
	 Laying out practical expectations for board members and getting training on board responsibilities.	 Building in strategic discussion time so legal/financial positioning of the organization builds toward a strong, effective program impact.
	 Partnering with existing nonprofits to explore shared interests. Finding a sponsor agency to help with "back room" functions, such as bookkeeping, joint purchasing or Human Resources.	 Creating a board calendar that balances discussion about "big picture" policy issues with program highlights.

INSTITUTIONAL

In addition to focusing on governance, board members are actively involved in fundraising for the organization. Board composition is relatively formal and diverse; includes people with access to major donors. Board size tends to be larger.



Board members are often influential and bring great resources and opportunities to the organization.



Board members are active leaders in fundraising, which allows Executive Director to focus on external relationships and management.



Resources allow the board to have plenty of infrastructure and support.



Can undervalue people without means but who understand the issues the organization addresses. Run the risk of losing touch with community needs.



In an effort to have all feel engaged, board can end up with make-work or become involved in staff work. Focus on fundraising can lessen focus on oversight. Can result in board membership “in name only,” as opposed to actively involved.



Overly formal structure can take on a life of its own. Large size can lessen individual board members’ ability to contribute. May require significant staff support.



Getting creative about how to include a variety of people beyond those with access to money.

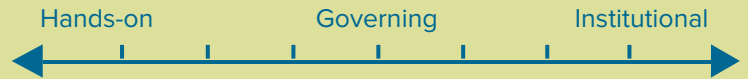


Holding “mission moments” and other informal activities at board meetings.



Finding ways for each board member to participate in a meaningful way, either through committees or ad hoc task groups.

OUR BOARD IS:



OUR STRENGTHS ARE:

OUR CHALLENGES ARE:

AREAS TO WORK ON:

KEY



Do we have the right people on our board and are they really engaged?





















Do they know what their job is?



Is the board organized in a way that helps us do our job well?

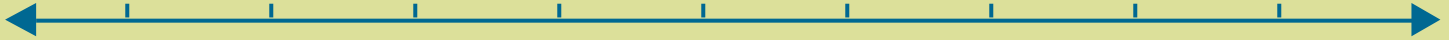
2. Who drives our board activity?

	FULLY EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR-LED	FULLY BOARD-DIRECTED
Description	Meeting agendas, meeting content and board selection are driven by the Executive Director.	Meeting agendas, meeting content and board selection are driven by the board.
Strengths	 The Executive Director has the opportunity to recruit from people with whom he/she works well; builds a supportive team.	 A broader group of people are involved in recruiting new board members, so the circle they draw from is wider. The biases of one person are less likely to shape board selection.
	 Executive Director is the person most connected to the daily realities and the mission – they know what is important to focus on.	 If the board is very experienced, they focus on the key priorities and future of the organization, setting policy and guiding strategic planning as well as being able to assess their own effectiveness.
	 The Executive Director can ensure that the board is well-informed of the key issues and priorities and that their time well spent.	 The board takes a burden off the staff when they take responsibility for their own work.
Potential challenges	 Relying on the Executive Director to recruit the board limits the field of potential board members. Those selected may not feel able to challenge the actions or thinking of the Executive Director.	 The board may recruit people not supportive of the Executive Director. This can lead to factions and antipathy. Those accustomed to closer relationships with an Executive Director may not stay.
	 The board may be unsure of its role or unclear about how to perform key tasks. They may be unable to identify potential problems, including mission drift, funding crises or fraud. The Executive Director's blind spots may go unchecked; can get myopic with little feedback or input from the board.	 The Executive Director may feel the need for direction, guidance and approval for day-to-day operational decisions, which can distract the board from its governance responsibilities. The Executive Director may feel a lack of trust, undervalued and micro-managed by the board.
	 Board members may feel that the Executive Director is handling everything so well that they don't need to pay attention, that their input is not needed or valued.	 Without the Executive Director's input and wisdom, important issues may fall through the cracks. Can be overly time consuming for board members.
You might want to think about...	 Recruiting seasoned board members. Getting training for the Board Chair about meeting facilitation and governance.	 Setting up a board committee to evaluate the Executive Director's performance and set professional development goals annually. Getting more experienced Executive Directors to provide peer advice.
	 Discussing what you want the ideal balance to be and then setting a plan for moving in that direction. Assessing strengths and weaknesses of the board and the Executive Director and setting up training to address gaps.	 Discussing what you want the ideal balance to be and then setting a plan for moving in that direction. Ensuring that the Executive Director's wisdom and experience is used to the organization's best advantage.
	 Encouraging regular meetings between the Executive Director and the Board Chair so they can plan board activities together.	 Setting up clear delegation plans with the Executive Director.

BOARD ACTIVITIES ARE PRIMARILY DRIVEN BY THE:

Executive Director

Board of Directors



OUR STRENGTHS ARE:

OUR CHALLENGES ARE:

AREAS TO WORK ON:

KEY



Do we have the right people on our board and are they really engaged?



Is the board organized in a way that helps us do our job well?



Do they know what their job is?

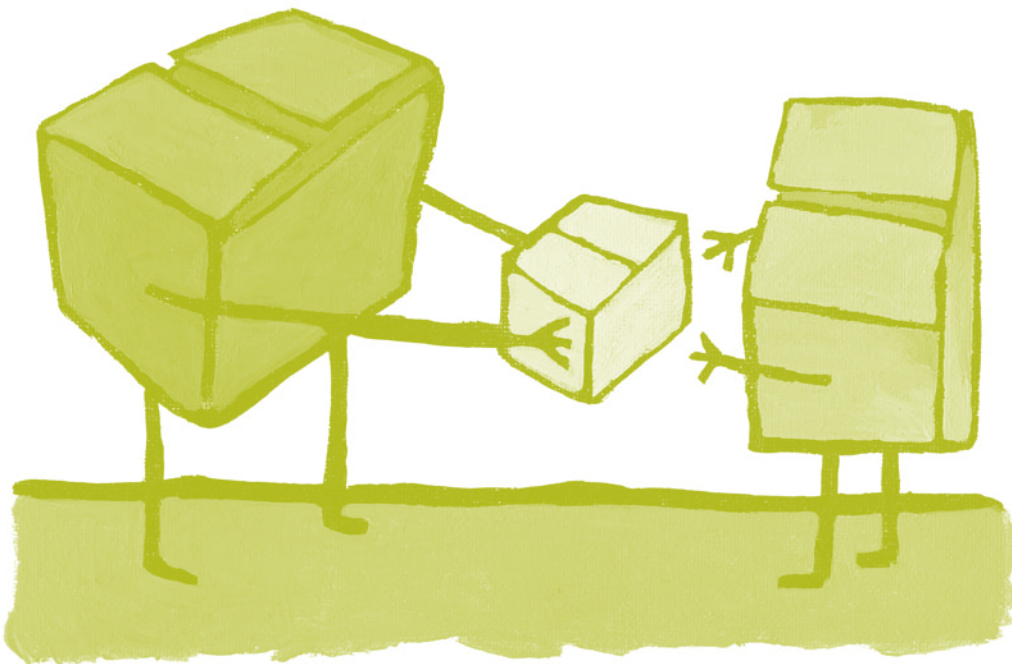
Who is our community base?




3. How do we define our community base?

WE DEFINE OUR COMMUNITY BASE AS:

Your community base can be a cultural group, a geographic community (e.g., rural, neighborhood), a group of people experiencing the same condition (e.g., cancer survivors), or any other way of describing who you are. The size and diversity of your community, as well as beliefs about self-determination and inclusiveness impact your options and choice of leaders.



4. What size is our community base?

	SMALLER	LARGER
Description	People tend to have multiple relationships with each other; may be related to each other. Relatively few people may be seen as potential leaders. Within your community, the same people tend to rotate from board to board, or are on multiple boards at the same time.	Board members are selected to build a diverse group, based on ethnicity, geography, experience, gender and/or skill set. Board members may come from different circles and may not know each other.
Strengths	 Everyone knows everyone, fostering a tight-knit feeling of mutual support.	 There is a broader pool of people to recruit for the board, which can make it easier to find people with a variety of skills and experience.
	 Board members may share a common understanding/experience of the issues.	 A board with a good mix of skills may have more tools to provide oversight and more people to involve in funding and program development.
	 Familiarity allows for business to be conducted in relaxed, informal manner.	 It may be easier to have a larger group of leadership volunteers, so board committees and task groups are easier to fill.
Potential challenges	 Board recruitment can be difficult. In smaller, rural or culturally specific communities, the pool of people viewed as potential leaders may be smaller and tapped out. It can be harder to recruit or balance specific skill sets.	 There may be gaps in perception of the community's issues. Board members may feel more anonymous and less personally engaged.
	 Opportunities for conflicts of interest and unchecked blind spots are greater. Personal grudges and past histories can play out in the boardroom and get in the way of oversight.	 Board members can feel that the person with a particular skill set, (i.e., legal, financial or personal experience) with the issues is responsible, so the rest don't need to get involved.
	 Informality and multiple relationships may blur lines of accountability/responsibility.	 People may not know each other, so it can take time to build trusting working relationships and a common understanding of the issues.
You might want to think about...	 Developing a recruitment tool outlining the skills/perspectives your board needs. Setting up a leadership development program to bring in younger or otherwise untapped leaders.	 Taking advantage of community size and really reaching outside inner circles to find board members with a variety of skills.
	 Providing training in specific areas of oversight such as finance or legal.	 Overt discussions about the culture of your organization so that everyone understands the ground rules for how you'll operate.
	 Working with other nonprofits to create a culture that supports people in serving on fewer boards in deeper ways. Developing clear and realistic conflict of interest policies.	 Organizing board retreats and other informal opportunities to help members get to know each other and the issues.

OUR COMMUNITY IS PRIMARILY

Small

Large



OUR STRENGTHS ARE:

OUR CHALLENGES ARE:

AREAS TO WORK ON:

KEY



Do we have the right people on our board and are they really engaged?




















Is the board organized in a way that helps us do our job well?



Do they know what their job is?

5. Who should lead our organization?

	MORE FOCUSED	MORE DIVERSE
Description	Board members are selected based on their membership in a community. For example, in a Hmong organization, the board members are all Hmong. Or board members of a battered women’s program have all experienced domestic violence.	Board members are selected to build a diverse group, based on ethnicity, geography, experience, gender and/or skill set. People on the board may or may not know each other.
Strengths	 Leadership from within the community ensures personal depth of experience on issues the organization addresses, and often, a shared understanding among board members.	 Recruiting from a more diverse pool of candidates can increase opportunities to be strategic about expanding skill sets and experiences.
	 Reinforces a strong cultural identity for the agency and provides a visual image to young people in the community that they too can be leaders. Builds depth of leadership experience in the community. Board members feel responsible to their community for good stewardship of organizational resources.	 Can ensure more broad-based support for funding and program.
	 Familiarity allows for business to be conducted in relaxed, informal manner.	 Input from a cross-section of people may generate more solutions and options. Opportunity for cross-cultural learning can strengthen organization’s impact on multiple communities.
Potential challenges	 Board recruitment can be difficult. In smaller, rural or culturally specific communities, the pool of people viewed as potential leaders may be smaller and tapped out. It can be harder to recruit or balance specific skill sets.	 There may be gaps in perception of the community’s issues; people from outside the community may not understand realities or nuances and may try to soften the organization’s stance on systems issues.
	 With multiple relationships, opportunities for conflicts of interest are greater. Personal grudges and past histories can play out in the boardroom and get in the way of oversight. The potential for blind spots is greater.	 It is challenging to manage so many viewpoints. Poorly managed, can result in tokenism – board members selected for a specific trait or expertise, without being fully accepted as a peer/contributing member.
	 Informality and multiple relationships may lead to blurred lines of accountability and responsibility.	 People may not know each other, so it can take time to build trusting working relationships and a common understanding of the issues.
You might want to think about...	 Setting up a leadership development program to bring in younger or otherwise untapped leaders.	 Ensuring that you draw leadership from key allies who can support you as you forward your vision.
	 Developing clear and realistic conflict of interest policies.	 Periodic orientation to make sure that all feel equally informed about the content and culture of the organization.
	 Working with other nonprofits to create a culture that supports people in serving on fewer boards in deeper ways.	 Organizing board retreats and other informal opportunities to help members get to know each other and the issues.

OUR BELIEF ABOUT WHO SHOULD LEAD OUR ORGANIZATION IS:

Focused—leadership should come from within our community

Diverse—leadership should reflect a broad cross-section of people and perspectives



OUR STRENGTHS ARE:

OUR CHALLENGES ARE:

AREAS TO WORK ON:

KEY



Do we have the right people on our board and are they really engaged?











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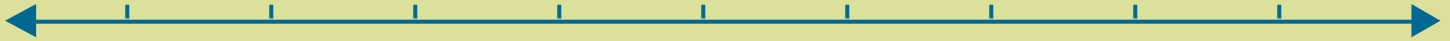
6. How do we feel about power and authority?

	MORE EGALITARIAN	MORE HIERARCHICAL
Description	Respect is demonstrated by treating everyone as equals. Decision-making is often by consensus.	Respect is demonstrated by acknowledging authority. Decision-making may be by majority vote.
Strengths	 Can broaden the pool of potential board members if everyone is seen as having an equal ability to lead.	 The board can be purposeful about board recruitment and leadership development.
	 All board members tend to have equal information, are able to fill in for each other and share roles.	 Clear lines of authority and responsibility allow for specialization and greater depth of expertise for individuals.
	 Board members may have greater sense of collegiality since all are treated as equals.	 There may be less confusion or dropped balls due to clear lines of authority.
Potential challenges	 Ability to develop and groom leadership can be hindered by democratic nominating processes where previously uninvolved people are elected as board members. May make it difficult to attract potential board members if there is no clear line of authority or clarity about roles and responsibilities.	 Can limit the pool of potential leaders if only those in positional leadership are considered or consulted.
	 If staff and board have overlapping roles, e.g. - when staff are board members, can be confusing to sort out responsibilities. Governance can take a back burner to program or issue work.	 The board can end up rubber-stamping decisions—not wanting to be disrespectful to those who proposed them.
	 Can be time-consuming as everyone is involved in everything. Can be confusing if no one is viewed as being “in charge” of a given activity. Trying to reach consensus on tricky issues can lead to long, drawn-out processes or lack of resolution.	 Can give undue weight to the opinions of board officers. Can leave people new to the organization feeling intimidated or left out, diminishing the contributions of those not currently seen as leaders.
You might want to think about...	 Creating a nomination process that balances community engagement with continuity and real awareness/passion of candidates.	 Developing a succession plan to formalize transfer of authority. Getting positional leaders in the community to recommend their protégés to your board.
	 Clarifying roles before starting a meeting. For example, boards that include staff could say, “Right now we are acting as board members and will set aside our staff issues.” Ensuring checks and balances in oversight.	 Setting up a system of checks and balances in oversight, such as quarterly review of strategic planning activities, annual assessment of board effectiveness or ongoing board leadership development training.
	 Decision-making techniques like “Fist of Five” or “Dynamic Governance” that can help you reach consensus more quickly. Developing board agendas that allow for a balance of governance and program issues.	 Checking in with individual board members to see if they have opportunities to participate fully.

OUR BELIEFS ABOUT POWER AND AUTHORITY ARE:

All members of the community have equal status

People in positions of authority should be respected and followed



OUR STRENGTHS ARE:

OUR CHALLENGES ARE:

AREAS TO WORK ON:

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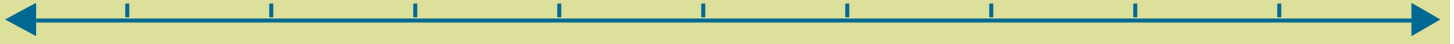
7. How responsible are we to our community?

	MORE INDIVIDUALLY-ORIENTED	MORE COMMUNITY-ORIENTED
Description	Individual self-reliance and autonomy is highly valued.	Loyalty is highly valued.
Strengths	 Personal commitment to the mission and reputation of the agency is strong.	 Board members may see their time as what they owe to their community and willingly volunteer to serve on boards. Strong sense of community unity and commitment to the issues of the organization.
	 Individual board members take responsibility for their actions and hold each other accountable.	 Board members feel responsible to their community for good stewardship of organizational resources. Shared values reinforce commitment to common goals and agenda.
	 Board members' expectations about roles and leadership development opportunities are clear and contribute to the organization's growth and planning activities.	 Board members feel energized because they feel part of something bigger than themselves.
Potential challenges	 Potential for board members to address their needs first.	 May be harder for potential board members to say "no" when over-tapped. As a result, they may not be able to make a meaningful contribution.
	 "Pull yourself up by the bootstraps" attitude can get in the way of understanding systems dynamics that impact clients.	 The organization can get pulled into many directions as board members feel a need to respond or react to community issues.
	 Individual board member development may overshadow participation in assessing organizational effectiveness.	 Organizational timelines may take a back seat when family or community crises occur.
You might want to think about...	 Creating personal development/leadership succession plans so that board members have opportunity to build leadership skills in their areas of interest.	 Hosting recognition events to honor those who take leadership in the community.
	 Giving responsibilities to individual board members.	 Conducting annual surveys to evaluate board satisfaction and effectiveness.
	 Including activities that build team unity, such as meals, retreats or open discussions on a periodic basis.	 Working with other nonprofits to create a culture that supports board members in serving on fewer boards in deeper ways.

IT IS MOST IMPORTANT FOR INDIVIDUALS IN OUR ORGANIZATION/CULTURE TO:

Focus on their own responsibilities

Respond to the needs of the community



OUR STRENGTHS ARE:

OUR CHALLENGES ARE:

AREAS TO WORK ON:

KEY



Do we have the right people on our board and are they really engaged?





















Is the board organized in a way that helps us do our job well?



Do they know what their job is?

8. Do we focus more on relationships or tasks?

	MORE TASK-ORIENTED	MORE RELATIONSHIP-ORIENTED
Description	Communication is likely to be more direct. Things often get accomplished by digging in and tackling the task. Time orientation is centered on deadlines and commitments.	Communication is likely to be more indirect and polite. Things often get accomplished through personal relationships. Time orientation is centered on relationships.
Strengths	 Direct approach to board recruitment can be refreshing and effective at reaching busy people.	 Board members may go out of their way to connect others to the organization. This can help with recruitment.
	 Focus on tasks and deadlines can mean that board responsibilities are taken care of quickly and efficiently.	 Graciousness can help board members address tough conversations in a way that keeps the team together.
	 Board members feel energized because they feel a sense of accomplishment.	 Board members feel energized because they feel part of something bigger than themselves.
Potential challenges	 Board members may not feel connected enough to the mission of the organization to tap their passion.	 Many of the board members may have been recruited through personal relationships. They may have allegiances or only stay on the board as long as their recruiter stays.
	 May forget the soft touches when focusing on their jobs.	 In an attempt to please others or keep peace, groups can make decisions that none really prefer. Decision-making can take a long time as people want to talk it all through. Can forget to deal with substance (and feel like non-productive time to task-oriented people). Conflict may become more personal or passive aggressive when it happens.
	 Can out-talk, not hear or offend individual board members in an attempt to get the “right” answer. Can forget to include all perspectives. Process can feel aggressive, impersonal or cold to relationship-oriented people.	 Conflict may not be addressed or may be addressed behind the scenes. There can be confusion or misunderstandings based on indirect communication.
You might want to think about...	 Laying out a clear process for board recruitment and setting up personal contacts to invite people to join.	 Using a personal approach to board recruitment. Encourage existing board members to take prospective board members to lunch, etc. Hosting recognition events to honor those who take leadership in the community.
	 Having board members develop plans for how they will promote the organization.	 Conducting annual surveys to assess board satisfaction and effectiveness.
	 Including activities that build team unity, such as meals, retreats or open discussions on a periodic basis. Getting work done in ad-hoc work groups.	 Working with other nonprofits to create a culture that supports board members in serving on fewer boards in deeper ways.

WHEN SOLVING PROBLEMS, THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTOR IS:

Figuring out the right answer

Maintaining good relationships



OUR STRENGTHS ARE:

OUR CHALLENGES ARE:

AREAS TO WORK ON:

KEY



Do we have the right people on our board and are they really engaged?





















Is the board organized in a way that helps us do our job well?



Do they know what their job is?

9. How much structure do we like?

	MORE STRUCTURED	MORE FLEXIBILITY
Description	Board packets and detailed agendas are developed well ahead of time; meetings are carefully orchestrated. The board may have a strong committee structure where much of the work gets done.	Board meetings and structure are more informal.
Strengths	 May be easier to recruit and retain board members because their commitment of time and energy is clear.	 May be easier to recruit people with no formal board training. Board members are open to possibilities and opportunities.
	 Board members are likely to be clearer about their roles and responsibilities.	 Board may be more able to address issues as they come up and more likely to seize upon opportunities.
	 When done well, can allow for really strategic and creative conversation that is planful and purposeful.	 When done well, board meetings can feel energizing, engaging and “real.” Can allow for entrepreneurial approaches, creativity or capitalizing on opportunities.
Potential challenges	 Board recruitment process may seem overly formal or intimidating to some. May be most attractive to corporate vs. community participants.	 May be harder to recruit and retain board members with finance and legal experience who are accustomed to a more formal business meeting format.
	 Board members may feel unengaged or that their input doesn’t really matter, especially if it feels like they are just rubber stamping decisions others have made.	 There may be less clarity about the board’s job and the time commitment required.
	 Structure can take on a life of its own—feel like a machine that keeps moving regardless of the people there. Creativity, passion and big picture thinking can be stifled. Can miss the forest for the trees. Board meetings can feel superficial or impersonal, as if there is no opportunity to change agendas that aren’t working.	 Can feel chaotic, reactive or unproductive when things aren’t prepared or positioned in advance; some details can fall through the cracks. Can be unclear to board members when formal action has been taken; at its worst, can put the organization at risk if key details are not attended to.
You might want to think about...	 Conducting annual surveys to evaluate board satisfaction and effectiveness.	 Downsizing the board allows for more flexible and efficient use of volunteer time.
	 Reviewing committee charges to make sure they aren’t doing staff work. Periodic review the five key board responsibilities to make sure they are being addressed.	 Periodic review the five key board responsibilities to make sure they are being taken care of.
	 Holding periodic retreats or other opportunities for board members to have extended discussions about issues facing the organization.	 Developing a board calendar to make sure that time is reserved for key duties. Holding periodic sessions to scan the environment and see if the organization is planning well for the future. Setting up ad hoc committees to accomplish tasks between meetings, which allows more flexibility in using board resources.

AS A GROUP, WE PREFER:



OUR STRENGTHS ARE:

OUR CHALLENGES ARE:

AREAS TO WORK ON:

KEY



Do we have the right people on our board and are they really engaged?














Is the board organized in a way that helps us do our job well?



Do they know what their job is?

10. How important is history and tradition?

	MORE TRADITIONAL	MORE CONTEMPORARY
Description	Organizations with long histories such as Girl Scouts and those based in agrarian cultures tend to have strong traditions that guide their actions. Thinking is rooted in symbolism, honor and respect. May have rituals and languages/ vocabularies all their own.	Thinking is based in “modern” values and behaviors, which may include the newest management or leadership theories.
Strengths	 May attract and retain more elders on the board, as older people may be more likely to have time to volunteer. Younger leaders can learn from elders.	 May attract and retain younger board members.
	 Can bring old wisdom to new challenges. Can be a mechanism for transmission and preservation of culture.	 Can ensure that the agency is in line with “best practices.” Can develop new responses to old challenges.
	 Board members may find meaning and comfort in the rituals and practices of the organization.	 May use technology to streamline work and help more people be engaged on the board.
Potential challenges	 Can be difficult to reach beyond a small group of insiders for recruitment. People who don’t have the history of the culture or organization may feel lost as insiders make references they don’t understand.	 It may be harder to recruit and retain elders.
	 May be less able to adapt to changing realities or miss seeing new possibilities. “We’ve always done it this way.” At its worst can result in the organization losing relevance. Can set up generational conflicts. Younger board members may feel impatient or that their expertise is not valued.	 Can get too theoretical. Ability to blend newest “theory” with “practice” may not translate well with day-to-day roles and responsibilities. Can set up generational conflicts. Board members may feel they are reinventing the wheel. “We tried that 10 years ago.”
	 May be hard to rotate elders off the board, even when they can’t attend – risking problems with quorum.	 Can forget to honor what came before, seeming disrespectful and causing older or more traditional board members to feel that their expertise is not valued. Can repeat mistakes of the past.
You might want to think about...	 Being purposeful about preparing new leaders. Pairing old board members with new ones as board buddies.	 Being purposeful about leadership transition and legacy. Pairing old board members with new ones as “board buddies.”
	 Finding ways to make sure that tradition is respected in new practices and approaches.	 Finding ways to make sure that tradition is respected in new practices and approaches.
	 Finding ways to frame the key areas of governance within the context of tradition. For example, clans determine individual roles in the Native American community; board members can look at what their clan affiliation tells them about how to do oversight.	 Having those steeped in the history give “mission-moments” periodically. Helping people get technology-literate and using the Internet.

OUR GUIDANCE FOR MAKING DECISIONS IS BASED UPON:

Tradition/
The past

Contemporary or
future trends



OUR STRENGTHS ARE:

OUR CHALLENGES ARE:

AREAS TO WORK ON:

KEY



Do we have the right people on our board and are they really engaged?



Is the board organized in a way that helps us do our job well?



Do they know what their job is?

More conversations to have with your board

Throughout this book we've been looking at how to answer three basic questions about your board through the filter of your board culture. Digging into the questions themselves is an important step to shaping your board to be strong and effective. Below you'll find a guide to more in depth discussions. The bullet points are only suggestions. You may have more specific thoughts about the issues that are relevant to your organization.



Do we have the right people on our board and are they really engaged?

- What skills and perspectives do we need on our board?
- How do we find them? Who plays what role in recruitment?
- Do we want our board to be made up only of people from our own community? What do we gain/lose by including people from outside our community on our board?
- How many of our board and staff are related to each other or know each other from other settings? When is this helpful and when might it be problematic? How do we manage that?
- What do we expect of our board members? What does it mean to be engaged? Do people show up for meetings? What do we do if they do not attend and/or are not engaged?
- How do we select/train our board chair and other leadership?
- Do we make time to for peer learning and support? How often do we have the opportunity to connect with other nonprofit leaders to get support and learn new things?



Do they know what their job is?

- How do we make sure our board takes care of its legally mandated responsibilities, including financial oversight?
- What role has our board decided to play in fundraising? Is it realistic?
- What else do we want to take on as a board, given our resources and the people at the table? Are we being realistic about our resources?
- What role does the ED play in guiding/training the board in its role?
- How do the Executive Director and the Board Chair work together to lead the organization? What helps and hinders their ability to work together well?
- When there is confusion between board and lead staff responsibility, how do you handle it?



Is the board organized in a way that helps us do our job well?

- What is the right balance of structure and flexibility for our board?
- Are there ways we could streamline our process to make it feel more natural?
- Who sets the board meeting agendas?
- What would help prepare our board to make thoughtful, future-oriented decisions?
- What work could we get done outside of board meetings? What is the best way to make that happen? Who should do what?

Setting goals and next steps



Do we have the right people on our board and are they really engaged?

1–Not at all 2–Very little 3–Somewhat 4–A great deal NA–I don't know



Strengths/weakness in this area:

What I'd like us to work on in this area:

NEXT STEPS:



Do they know what their job is?

1–Not at all 2–Very little 3–Somewhat 4–A great deal NA–I don't know



Strengths/weakness in this area:

What I'd like us to work on in this area:

NEXT STEPS:



Is the board organized in a way that helps us do our job well?

1–Not at all 2–Very little 3–Somewhat 4–A great deal NA–I don't know



Strengths/weakness in this area:

What I'd like us to work on in this area:

NEXT STEPS:

Facilitator's guide



Facilitator's guide

This workbook is meant to be a tool to spark conversations for boards of nonprofit organizations. It can be used on its own by any board. Our experience shows us that this tool is particularly effective at helping boards to quickly identify issues they've needed to discuss but perhaps couldn't put their fingers on. Sometimes conversations flow more easily when there is a facilitator to keep things going and focused. (It also allows all the leaders to participate in the discussion.) If you decide to have a facilitator help you go through this process, give them this guide.

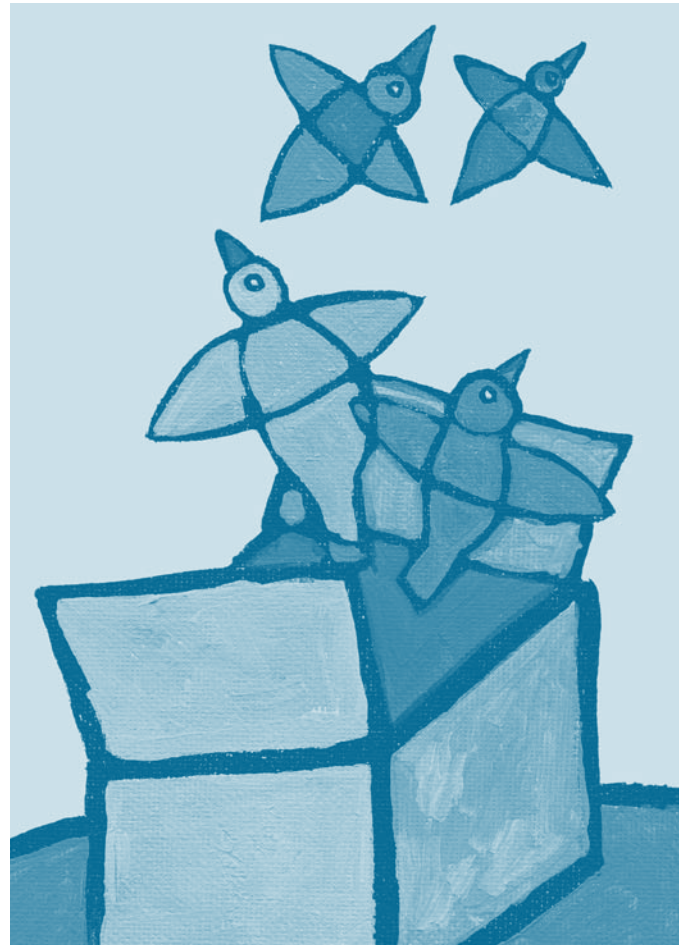
This workbook can also be used with a group of people from a variety of organizations, as a way to jumpstart their conversations with their boards. If you use it that way—note that it is most effective when the Executive Director and the Board Chair both attend the workshop.

Throughout this guide we'll also give alternative tips for working with a mixed group. Those ideas will be presented in separate areas within the text.

It is really important that this process be conducted in an open and nonjudgmental way. There are no right or wrong answers to any of the questions the group will discuss, only questions of style. The group will get the most out of this process if they are free to really reflect, without having to defend or support their perspectives.

Basics tenets of good facilitation apply here. Smile and greet people as they enter. "Come in! Make yourselves at home!" Keep the atmosphere light. Make eye contact. Make sure that all in the room have a chance to speak.

Set up the room so that all are comfortable, face each other and feel equally part of the conversation. Make the circle big enough so that all have ample room, but not so big that there are empty spaces between people. Comfortable chairs help!



1. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

Start the conversation by telling board members they are about to take a look at the culture and style of their work together; and how that helps them or gets in their way. This tool helps to affirm group identity or identify where there is a lack of agreement on culture and norms, when used with the full board.

Start the process with introductions. Have each person introduce him or herself, even if they already know each other. In addition to the usual things they might say, ask them to answer a question that gets them talking and thinking.

Examples:

- What brought you to this workshop today?
- What were you thinking on the way here?
- What do you hope we'll accomplish in this session?

2. BOARD BASICS

Spend a few minutes going over the 5 key responsibilities of a board of directors on page i. Emphasize that these items are both legally required and critical to helping the organization thrive. But how they get accomplished is the board's prerogative.

3. PRE-ASSESSMENT

Have people open their workbooks to pages iii and iv. Tell them that they will be looking at ten dimensions that help to describe the way they operate; their style and culture.

Ask them to quickly—in 5 minutes or so—go through the worksheet and mark where they think their board is on each dimension. “Use your gut. Don't spend too much time or think too much.”

4. SELECT DIMENSION(S) TO DISCUSS

Put a piece of paper on the wall with each dimension listed. When all have finished the worksheet on pages iii and iv, walk through each of the ten dimensions and ask the group how many think the board is on one side of the continuum; and how many are on the other. Show visually where there is agreement and where there are divergent perceptions. Differing perceptions play themselves out in the board room.

There is no need to ask or record where boards are on each dimension with a mixed group

Go around the room and ask each person to say which of the dimensions they would like to discuss, and why. As a prompt, suggest that they may want to pick one that seems to be at the heart of a challenge the board is facing;

or where there seems to be major disagreement among their board members.

Allow time for others in the room to ask questions of each other. This is a very important mutual learning opportunity.

5. DISCUSS SELECTED DIMENSIONS

Pick one or two dimensions for the group to discuss. They might pick dimensions that came up most frequently, where perceptions really differed, or that seemed to stir the most feeling in the group.

In a mixed group, this exercise is most effective in small group discussions. Ask people from the same organization to pair up. (If there are people who came alone to the session, have them pair up with each other). Each group can then decide which one or two dimensions they want to discuss.

Direct people to the page in the workbook associated with the first dimension to be discussed. Encourage people to spend a few minutes reviewing the page, with the following directions:

- On each dimension you'll find descriptions of what it might look like to be at the far ends of the continuum. Below that, you'll see examples of the strengths that might be associated with being at that point on the continuum, followed by the potential challenges. At the bottom of the page are things you might want to think about.
- Remember—these are *only examples*, and they represent the extremes. Most organizations are somewhere in the middle on these dimensions. There is no right or wrong answer here. These are simply descriptors of how you do your work.

- Your first job is to look at the page for items that seem relevant to your organization and your board. Circle anything that resonates with your experience. Then use the space to the right to write down **your** board's strengths and challenges in this area, as well as areas you'd like to work on.

Give people five minutes to work individually on this. Then have the full group discuss their thoughts.

Give a mixed group twenty minutes to work on this in their small groups. When they are done, ask each in turn to report in on their conversations.

Ask the following questions as prompts:

- Did you find any examples that rang true for your board?
- What particular strengths or challenges did you identify for your board?
- What “ahas” did you have as you worked on this?

Repeat this exercise with one or two more dimensions the group identified as important to discuss. The conversations will build on each other, so feel free to move through the conversation more quickly if you are covering the same themes.

Again, allow time for others in the room to ask questions of each other and offer suggestions and ideas.

6. DEVELOP CONSENSUS ON AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Ask people to turn to the goal-setting worksheet at the end of the workbook, page 23. Explain to them that they have been working on a few dimensions of their organizational culture as it relates to their board. Show them that those conversations are part of a larger conversation about three key questions they need to answer about their board:

- Do we have the right people on our board and are they really engaged?
- Do they know what their job is?
- Is the board structured in a way that helps them do our job well?

Emphasize that this exercise is about setting next steps.

Have the group spend five minutes writing what they see as overall strengths, challenges and areas to work on related to the three questions.

In a mixed group, pair up by twos again and give them fifteen minutes for discussion. Remind them that we hope they'll take this opportunity to plan for how they'll go back to their full boards and continue the conversation.

Pull the group back together and ask each in turn to report on one or two key thoughts.

7. GET CLOSURE AND COMMITMENT TO ACTION

Bring the group to consensus on next steps. Record responses to the following questions on a piece of flipchart paper.

- What are the most important things we talked about today?
- What struck you as we went through this exercise?
- What are the three things we will do differently as a result of this conversation?
- What must we **not** change?
- What are our next steps?

Go around the room and ask each person what they are taking away from this exercise. “What will you do differently tomorrow or next week as a result of this workshop?”

Helpful web-based resources

There are many board development resources on the internet. Following are a few examples at the time of this printing of web sites that offer free tools and informational articles on nonprofit governance and management. Do your own research. Web resources change over time. Make sure that when you use the tools they provide—you adapt them to what you know about your organization’s culture, size and resources.

MAP for Nonprofits

www.mapforprofits.org

Alliance for Nonprofit Management

www.allianceonline.org

BoardSource (formerly, National Center for Nonprofit Boards)

www.boardsource.org

CompassPoint Nonprofit Services

www.compasspoint.org

Fieldstone Alliance

www.fieldstonealliance.org

Free Complete Toolkit for Boards

www.managementhelp.org/boards/boards.htm

Minnesota Council on Nonprofits

www.mncn.org

MN Attorney General Charities Division

www.ag.state.mn.us/charities

Nonprofit Assistance Fund

www.nonprofitassistancefund.org

Nonprofit Good Practice Guide

www.npgoodpractice.org

