

The Board Chair

Some
Questions
and Answers



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About this Guide

Being the chair of your board can be rewarding and challenging. To make being a board chair a rewarding experience and give you and your board confidence that you are up for the job, we have put together this question and answer booklet.

The booklet begins with an overview of what is expected of every board member. Following the overview is a discussion of the chair's roles and responsibilities. The final topics focus on the skills, knowledge and experience it takes to be a board chair.

We hope that as an incoming or current chair you will find this booklet adds positively to your experience and helps you be the best chair you can be.

What is the board?

The board is the **guardian** and the **owner** of the nonprofit.

As **guardian**, the board exists to make sure the nonprofit's resources are used for the mission.

As **owner**, the board is legally responsible for the nonprofit and must make sure it and the people who work for it obey the law.

What are the responsibilities of a board member?

A board member has two responsibilities:

Duty of care:

The board member has the duty to take care of the organization as though it were his or her own business. Paying attention and doing everything possible to address the organization's needs satisfies this duty.

Duty of loyalty:

The duty of loyalty means the board member must act in the best interest of the organization and cannot act in his or her own interest. The member cannot profit personally from his or her decisions made as a board member.

How can board members be responsible?

Be committed by asking hard questions, seeking resources and being available in good and bad times.

Attend every business meeting to learn about what is going on, resolve issues, plan for the future, evaluate what has happened and set up rules to guide the board and staff in their work.

Be independent by judging the facts for yourself and always first considering the needs of the non-profit and those served by the organization.

What is the responsibility of the board chair?

In addition to the two responsibilities of every board member, the board chair is responsible for leadership. To lead, the chair must:

- **Be inspired and inspire.** The chair must know why the nonprofit exists, have an idea about how the community will benefit because of the nonprofit and then be able to share these thoughts and get the rest of the board to agree.
- **Be driven and drive.** The chair must have a mental picture of the nonprofit's future, see the board's visions of the future and bring the two together.
- **Listen and hear.** Listen to the needs of the board and staff and understand how well the organization is doing.

Four skills for being a great board chair.

1. **Facilitation and group process.** The chair must be able to manage a group and understand group process and dynamics. With this skill, the chair must be able to help members agree and act on the matters that affect the present and future of the nonprofit.
2. **Communication.** The chair must speak clearly and with knowledge, inform in a timely manner, listen and hear and ensure that all members are talking and working with each other.
3. **Relationship development and management.** The chair must be able to work with the senior management, each board member and outside parties to understand and respond to needs to make the organization work well.
4. **Planning and evaluation.** The chair must ensure that the organization has a mission and direction, that it knows how it will achieve its mission and plans and that it recognizes when it has done so.

When is a board member ready to be a chair?

This depends on your nonprofit's needs and stage of development, but some signs are when a member:

- Is committed—has given energy, time and attendance and skills;
- Has experience—has served in other officer positions;
- Has capacity—personally has the time and energy to be a leader; and
- Has a vision for your nonprofit.

How long should a board chair's term be?

Depending on your nonprofit's needs and stage of development, a chair should remain in office for at least one year and rarely for more than three years.

The first year is for learning and planning. The second year is for putting plans into place. The last part of the third year is for figuring out if the plans worked.

Long terms of office (more than six years) often result in the chair's losing vision and understanding. Shorter terms — less than one year — are not enough time to learn, build trust and develop plans.

What are the five activities of the board chair?

1. Meeting management
2. Planning and evaluation
3. Fundraising
4. Teaching and supporting board members and the executive director
5. Communication

Each of these roles is described with the next five questions.

What is the chair's role at board meetings?

The board chair's role is to plan and manage the board meetings.

Planning the meetings can include:

- Checking the minutes of the last meeting to see what business must be discussed;
- Conferring with the committee chairs and staff to find out what they need from the meeting (thoughts, recommendations and actions); and
- Writing and faxing or mailing an agenda (items to be discussed) to every member before the meeting, along with all relevant materials to be read beforehand.

(For instance, at Board X, the chair doesn't allow any business to be discussed at the meeting unless board members receive written notes for each meeting. New items can be introduced under the agenda "new items" but only to let members know they should expect to have materials for the next meeting.)

Managing the meeting can include:

- Making sure everyone uses the agreed-upon rules for running the meeting;
- Making sure there is an agenda and it is followed;
- Keeping time;
- Taking care that everyone who wants to speak can do so; and
- Making sure there are agreements and ways to implement them.

(For instance, Board Chair Jolie, of You Save Your Neighborhood, uses the rules of consensus to get agreements. Consensus means that there is no action unless everyone agrees.)

What is the chair's role in planning and evaluation?

- To help give a vision for your nonprofit;
- To make sure your nonprofit has a strategic direction;
- To make sure annual goals are set;
- To provide regular reviews of your nonprofit and its program activities and finances; and
- To evaluate performance of management and staff.

(For instance, the board chair of Your Neighborhood plans a board retreat before the annual business meeting of the organization to review the previous year's work and consider the plans for the next year. usually, committees and staff will have been working for a couple of months and will have written recommendations for the board planning session.)

What is the chair's role in teaching and support?

- Teaching board members about decision making;
- Teaching members about the technical side of your nonprofit; and
- Supporting and mentoring members and the executive director.

(For instance, the board member of the Fine City Group schedules a board orientation once a year. Every board member is expected to attend, and new members are required to attend. The chair gives information about the bylaws, board manual and rules about how the board makes decisions and how much members should participate.)

What is the chair's role in communication?

The board chair can

- Represent your nonprofit in public;
- Communicate with each board member;
- Represent the board's will to the staff; and
- Link board and staff.

(For instance, the board chair meets with the executive director once a week for two hours to keep up with the activities of the organization.)

What role can the board chair have in fundraising?

When it comes to fundraising, the chair can:

- Review, sign and and authorize grant proposals;
- Train board members in asking for money;
- Ask for money; and
- Attend fundraising activities.

(For instance, the board chair and the executive director go together to present their nonprofit's proposals to the United Way.)

What is the chair's relationship to the staff?

The chair

- Is the voice of the board to the (senior) staff and the voice of the staff to the board;
- Communicates the board's needs to the staff;
- Communicates the staff's needs to the board;
- Serves as the supervisor and mentor to the senior staff; and
- Makes sure that the staff carries out the board's plan and direction.