

Board Focus on What Matters the Most – A Checklist

***Disclaimer:** This document is not intended as legal advice. Your organizational goals, purpose, bylaws, and values should drive the creation of this document.*

Often a nonprofit has few or no staff, requiring the board to perform work that implements the mission, not just provide oversight. When this occurs, it is essential that board members do not lose sight of their fiduciary responsibilities, including setting the strategic direction for the organization. While not every board, even those with staff, will be high performing all the time, it is helpful to aspire and work toward becoming and maintaining excellent performance as a team on behalf of mission.

Through research and proven practice over decades, we know the characteristics of a high-performing board as well as where the board can have the most impact in their time spent as mission stewards. While the board can do more, they should strive to not do less. To that end, most boards need training and support to reach these goals over time. Investing in the team at any stage of development is worth the time and effort.

The following checklists can be used to discern what is working well within the team, where to focus the board's energy, or how to realign for more mission success.

Importantly, each of the items can be examined through facilitated discussion to determine how best to implement the idea within each team. No two teams will do the work exactly the same, as the culture and values of the organization are necessary ingredients to implementation.

Concentrate on the board roles that matter most – a checklist

- Center all decisions on purpose/values and strategic direction
 - Define, update, and advance
 - Clarify key messages (internal and external)
 - Guide the nonprofit sustainability journey (see the **Foraker Nonprofit Sustainability Model**)
- Define high-level organization performance and impact goals
 - Define strategic and annual plans
 - Approve major policies and program initiatives
- Ensure compliance with appropriate levels of internal controls
- Partner for impact to maximize people and resources to do the most good within your community
- Advocate for mission and systemic change that gets to the root of the mission and larger causes surrounding your mission

- Ensure financial resiliency
 - Oversee, conserve, enhance
- Select /support/partner/evaluate the CEO/Executive Director
- Prioritize the board's self-improvement

Ways to focus the board's energies on the issues that matter the most are also the ingredients for a high-performing board

- Agree on key strategic issues for the next 12-18 months.** Identify where the board's focus will have the greatest impact on the overall performance of the organization.
 - Create an annual board plan to focus your efforts
 - Annually agree on the board's roles to add "most value" for each issue
 - Budget for priorities
 - Use the plan to connect the goals to the team
 - Ask: Who needs to come to the meeting to drive the issue to success?
 - Map the meeting agenda to focus on the goals and decisions from the organization's priorities.
- Align your board committee structure to the annual and strategic priorities.** Do this either by breathing purpose and goals into existing groups as guided by the plan and/or form new committees to move goals forward.
- Use a few targets and metrics to monitor performance and provide accountability.** Often boards are swirling in a blizzard of data but have little information to act on. This narrowing down usually results in a "dashboard" of information for the board to track and navigate decisions. Financial accountability, transparency, and stewardship are deeply embedded in this effort as are mission performance goals and indicators of success.
- Design meetings to look ahead** – not in the past as is the typical format, thereby maximizing engagement. Design the agenda around "decisions, discussion, and education." Want to learn more? Contact us.
- Create a climate of healthy dissent to make the best decisions.** Healthy is the key word here, also known as productive, thoughtful, respectful, and a space where board members feel seen and heard. Trust is essential to fostering a climate where differing opinions are cultivated before decisions are made. And, once decisions are made, stand by them with one voice as a board.
- Make us of an active finance committee to appropriately steward resources in the public's trust.** This committee acts as a check and balance to staff and the full board,

ensuring policies and procedures are up to date for compliance and stewardship of the organization's assets and responsibilities. Ideally, this team is mentoring, modeling, and leading the way for the organization to ensure financial resiliency.

- ❑ **Use a board development committee to recruit, engage/orient/train, and provide a graceful exit for people on purpose.** Writing, approving, and using a board succession plan that covers all three steps in the board cycle is essential.
- ❑ **Identify and reach out to key partners that complement and supplement your team and help everyone do more good in the community.** Solidify those relationships early and often to ensure it is mutually beneficial for your mission, their mission, and the community everyone serves.
- ❑ **Advocate for mission and systemic change that gets to the root of the mission and the larger causes surrounding your mission.** Regularly identify and prioritize areas where the board can help educate federal, state, tribal, and local decision makers on issues that further advance the mission and/or change the larger systems for good. Remember to stay nonpartisan and learn the rules. There is a big difference between education and lobbying. Every organization can do both, but some have limitations.
- ❑ **Ensure a healthy board-CEO partnership.** This takes focus and work from both sides and can be the single biggest predictor of success, falter, or failure of the organization. Handle with care.

Why strive for a high-performing board?

- Helps prioritize recruitment and engagement of “the right people at the right time to take the mission forward”
- Improves full engagement of the team
 - Activates the wisdom in the room
 - People want to feel useful and productive, and contribute to a better world – boards can be that place
 - Offers a path to strategic use of decisions and action
- Creates focus – making the best and highest use of time
- Fosters a more welcoming and inclusive place
 - Strives to model community connections to the issues the group is grappling with as defined by the mission
- Makes board service more fun and attractive to new recruits because “fun” and “meaningful” often go hand-in-hand in board service
- Helps prevent/solve common board problems

Some signs your team is achieving high performance

- The board is energized and proud of its service.
- Meetings are productive because they are focused on strategic issues that matter the most.
- The board and CEO are real partners.
- Committees are active, engaged, and meaningful to the overall work of the organization.
- The board feels like it can understand and agree on success.
- The board is strategic and thoughtful in its work to select a diverse group and is focused on creating a welcoming and supportive space.
- The board meeting is focused on looking forward instead of in the past.
- Diverse points of view are encouraged, and there is a climate of healthy dissent.
- The board and CEO feel free to innovate and think creatively.