

Eight Phases of Board Succession Planning – A Guide

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

This guide will support your work in succession planning as you structure your process and plan for success including the phases of strategic recruitment, thoughtful engagement and graceful exit.

Please consult your organizational bylaws and practices before adopting any of these ideas for your plan. Variations are required depending on the board election process. The sections and ideas in this guide mirror the composition of a full board succession plan. For more information, see our resources on a **Board Succession Plan Table of Contents** and worksheet.

PREPARE

Step 1 – Plan for the organization to take this work seriously with adaptability. Use the tools in your organization to ensure the right person at the right time.

This stage answers the question: Are you structured to succeed in a strategic board recruitment-engagement-exit cycle?

Useful reference tools: bylaws, strategic plan, board job descriptions, lifecycle stage

Action steps: for full board approval

- Create a committee structure (implement/reboot/elevate)
- Write/affirm/update board and officer job descriptions
- Write/affirm/update board service FAQs
- Write/affirm/update diversity priorities
- Write/affirm/update a board manual and secure it online with all the board materials that support their fiduciary responsibility
- Write the plan (final version for board approval)

Step 2 – Forecast the characteristics needed in new board members over the next 3-5 years.

This stage answers the question: What kind of board members are needed over the next 3-5 years to meet the organization's goals?

Useful reference tools: board matrix, strategic plan, diversity goals

Action steps:

- Use your strategic plan, core values, and diversity goals to identify the annual recruitment priorities
 - Write/affirm/update the board matrix and recruitment goals
 - Update the categories in the board matrix – specific to your organization – to identify the characteristics, backgrounds, styles, etc. and identify the inventory of potential candidates
 - Define the annual use of this tool as a tool for stability/status quo, boundary spanner, or creative disruptor before putting it into action
 - Stability/status quo: what we have now
 - Boundary spanner: helping connect the organization deeper or to new constituencies
 - Creative disruptor: intentional shifts in diversity, lifecycle adaptation
 - Once the matrix is filled in – complete the remaining steps by adding names/prospects
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RECRUIT

Step 3 – Nurture potential board members' interest in your organization

This stage answers the questions: What are the three most important things for our board to accomplish this year? Do we have the right people on the board to make that happen? (Create or refer back to your board matrix.) How do we go about systematically getting the folks we have identified more engaged and more knowledgeable about our organization?

Useful reference tools: annual plan, board matrix

Action steps:

- Based on the top priorities for the year, narrow down to the top tier of board prospects
- Conduct strategic outreach
- Invite and educate potential candidates
- Determine the appropriate outreach strategy to each person to nurture their relationship with the mission/organization/board members/CEO
 - Strategic outreach = Use committees, communications etc.
 - Provide board job description to articulate expectations
 - Assure that the way you are involving the person is meaningful to them and has an impact on the organization

Step 4 – Place potential candidates to “stand,” “run” or “agree” to serve in board positions

This stage answers the question: Who is the right person, right now?

Useful reference tools: Board job description, board service FAQ re: time, travel, financial requirements

Action steps:

- Select from the cultivated group—folks who are truly ready and willing to join the board
 - Show them a job description during this process to clarify expectations
 - Make it clear that you are selecting them because of their specific skill set and/or life experiences and their belief in mission
 - Invite potential candidates to “stand” or “run” or “agree” to serve in board positions
 - Follow the process outlined in your bylaws
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ENGAGE

Step 5 – Orient new board members by designing and conducting meaningful connections

This stage answers the questions: How can we create a welcoming and inclusive space? How do we support new board members in getting to know our culture, decision process, and informal norms?

Useful reference tools: board manual, board FAQ, group or one-on-one meetings, copy of the current financials, board mentors, diversity commitment

Action steps:

- Design an orientation that is mission-focused, fun, and sets people up for success
 - *Remember: People join the board because they are excited about the work you do not because of formal paperwork. Give them the board manual with the expectation that they read it and plan a time to follow up. If folks are excited to do the work of the mission, they will read the required materials.*
- Provide a specific opportunity for board members to understand the financial position and business model of the organization. This can be a meeting with the CEO, CFO, board treasurer, and/or finance committee.
- Document and live an ongoing plan to support board member engagement
 - Consider using board mentors
 - Serve as mentors for new members

Step 6 – Educate new board members by making the time to do it

This stage answers the questions: How can we continue to create an environment that fosters the board as a team and instills an environment of continual improvement? How will we make the time to ensure a good board culture? (*High performing boards don't happen by accident*)

Useful reference tools: board retreats, educational workshops, mission moments at board meetings, external training opportunities to build capacity

Action steps:

- Work with the CEO, board chair, and committee to design a yearly retreat to think strategically and provide time for more in-depth discussions and trust-building within the team
 - Focus on adapting, shifting, and engaging to be a welcoming space
- Offer access to additional skill-building opportunities for the board to become a high-performing board
- Use the mission moment tools regularly at board meetings (*see Foraker resource page for more information*)

Step 7 – Assess for continuous improvement

This stage answers the questions: How can we practice continuous improvement? Where can we strengthen the way we work as a team?

Useful reference tools: board self-assessment tool that is right-sized for your organization, annual priorities

Action steps:

- Determine the best path for assessment. Options range from formal to informal and multiple times a year to once a year. Ultimately you are looking for engagement of the team and opportunities to see trends or areas of improvement.
 - *Every time the board changes significantly in its composition or the organization enters a different life cycle phase, there is often a need to make adjustments.*
 - Options could include one or a combination of approaches:
 - Formal assessment tool with facilitation
 - Informal assessment tool offered by and for the board
 - Consistent check-in options like the use of:
 - Executive sessions to check in as a team in a safe space
 - Quick feedback form to assess trends for improvement
 - *Pick something that will provide useful and timely information to make necessary adjustments to fully engage the team.*
- Provide the board development committee and the CEO with the results to review and make recommendations to the whole board for areas of focus and celebration

GRACEFUL EXIT

Step 8 – Transition and match the efforts to the person and your organization's culture

This stage answers the questions: How do we best thank board members for their service? How will we ensure they stay connected to the mission once they leave the board?

Useful reference tool: organizational core values

Action steps:

- Keep track of terms and term limits to celebrate and prepare for milestones
 - *If you don't have term limits, consider adding terms to your bylaws (without limits) to create natural moments for each board member to assess their intentions to stay actively engaged*
- Live out a clear acknowledgment plan that matches organizational culture to thank people for their service (formal and/or informal)
 - Say "thank you" in a culturally appropriate way – gifts of items, words, or actions
 - Determine if there are special or additional ways to thank officers for their service
- Ensure a clear process to keep people engaged in the mission and on the mailing list once their service is complete

The Full Cycle of Board Succession

