

Self-Assessments for Nonprofit Boards

A strong, vibrant board of directors is a clear indicator of a healthy organization. Yet even the best organizations need a periodic check-up to ensure that they cannot just survive but will really thrive in today's environment. To check your board's vital signs, or to put in place practices and strategies for a healthy and energized board, the best place to start is with a board self-assessment.



Many people serving on a nonprofit's board have never done so before, and others may have served on a nonprofit board that has different expectations for board members, so a basic discussion about the role of the board will help set consistent expectations. Once expectations are managed, the next step is to invite board members to participate in a **self-assessment process** that will reveal how far away (or not!) the board believes it is from the expectations it set for itself. The results of the self-assessment can help identify issues needing clarification, gaps in skills board members believe they need for the board to be successful, and topics for future board education. And importantly, the self-assessment process will engage the board in the same process that the nonprofit itself should be quite familiar with: measuring its own effectiveness.

Considering the important role the board has within a nonprofit, why would any organization be content with a sub-standard board — a board with inadequate performance and fulfillment of its responsibilities — and not be open and willing to improve its members' individual and collective performance? The best way to make the case for board improvement is to conduct periodic board self-assessments to identify your board's strengths and areas in need of improvement.

WHY ASSESS PERFORMANCE? Board self-assessment provides you with the opportunity to:

- look internally at the board itself
- reflect on your board members' individual and shared responsibilities
- identify different perceptions and opinions among board members
- determine areas of responsibility that need attention
- use the results as a springboard for board improvement
- increase the level of board teamwork
- clarify mutual board/staff expectations
- clarify common objectives as well as check that everyone is speaking the same language, i.e. ensuring that everyone abides by a shared vision
- demonstrate accountability as a serious organizational value
- display credibility to funders and other external audiences

The bottom line is that effective boards are those that regularly and candidly ask themselves: "How can we do better?"