

Nine Questions for the Dedicated Board Member

Exchange Evaluation Instrument

1. Do you understand your responsibilities as a board member?

Being a board member is not an honorary position—it entails serious obligations. The board of directors of a non profit corporation bears final responsibility for the direction and control of the organization. This involves setting goals and policies, overseeing administration, evaluating performance, and monitoring finances.

2. Is the board well organized to accomplish its responsibilities?

As volunteers, most board members can only devote a limited amount of time to board work. Therefore, it is imperative that their time be spent effectively. Most of the work of the board should take place in active committees with staff support. Meetings of committees and the full board should keep on task with the majority of time devoted to issues of the highest priority.

3. Is there an ongoing board development process?

The board should have in place an ongoing effort to recruit new board members who are committed to the goals of the organization and who bring to the board a full range of skills and perspectives. New members should have the opportunity to participate in a thorough orientation on the activities and structure of the organization and their responsibilities as board members.

4. Are board members committed to the mission of organization?

A paramount responsibility of the board is to define the short-term and long-term goals for the organization. These goals should be clearly communicated throughout the organization as well as to the community at large. Periodically, the board should re-evaluate this mission statement in light of changing community needs and resources.

5. Does the board closely monitor the performance of the organization?

For board members to effectively carry out their responsibilities, they must keep their fingers on the pulse of the organization. They should keep in touch informally by observing the organization at work and by soliciting feedback from people the organization is serving. In addition, the board should carry out a formal periodic evaluation of the organization's progress toward achieving its goals.

6. Do board members make well-informed budgetary decisions?

The budget is an organization's most powerful policy statement. Shaping and approving the annual budget is the most important single task board members are called upon to perform. To carry out this task responsibly, they must be consulted early in the budget development

process, they must be given adequate information about the financial and program implications of budget proposals, and they must deliberately weigh budget decisions in terms of the goals of the organization.

7. Does the board exercise effective oversight of the organization's financial management?

Board members should periodically review the organization's financial statements to assure that income and expenses are in line with the annual budget, and that assets and liabilities are being responsibly managed. At least annually, the board should determine whether adequate financial controls are in place. In addition, the board must approve and update a plan for the maintenance and insurance of the organization's physical assets.

8. Is there a healthy tension in relationships between board and staff members?

Unless a board abdicates its responsibility and simply acts as a rubber stamp for the staff, there are bound to be periods of tension between board and staff members. Often these tensions occur when board members overstep their bounds and inject themselves into the day-to-day operations of the organization. To prevent this, there should be a clear understanding among all parties as to the demarcation between board and staff responsibilities.

Tension can also arise when staff and board members openly disagree about a proposed course of action. While it is helpful if board and staff members can work together in harmony, board members must appreciate that their duty transcends pleasing the staff. A board member is elected by the members of the corporation to represent their interests on the board. Sometimes the interests of the members at large do not coincide with the interests of staff members. In these cases, board members must work through these conflicts and reach decisions in the best interests of the organization. In an effectively functioning organization, such tensions are dealt with openly and professionally, with a minimum of lingering hard feelings.

9. Does the board have an effective system for evaluating the performance of the executive director?

It has been said that a strong executive director may be able to carry an organization with a weak board, but that a strong board cannot save an organization from the ill effects of a weak executive director. A board must set clear standards of performance expected of an executive director and commit itself to the ongoing task of evaluating the director's performance against those standards.

*Credits: This form was developed by Exchange Press as a service to our readers. Please use it in your program. The title of this form was adapted from a form developed by Terry W. McAdam and the contents from a variety of sources including **The Nonprofit Organization Handbook** (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1980) by Tracy D. Connors; **A Handbook for Day Care Board Members** (New York: Day Care Council of New York, Inc., 1984) by Christine Dimock Secor; **The Board of Directors of Nonprofit Organizations** (Washington, DC: Management Assistance Group, 1977) by Karl Mathiasen, III; and **Evaluating the Performance of Trustees and School Heads** (Boston: National Association of Independent Schools, 1986) by Eric W. Johnson.*