



# How to Prepare Board Members to Govern Effectively

You need to go beyond the traditional orientation for new board members.

By Doug Eadie

**T**he better educated and trained your organization's board members are in the work of governing, the more likely they are to perform at a high level. So every board that's committed to high-impact governing must also be committed to its own continuing education, dealing with two basic educational challenges:

- **How do you make sure that new board members are prepared to hit the ground running, rather than spending their first year learning the ropes?**
- **How do you keep board members' governing knowledge and skills up-to-date so that they can participate productively and creatively in ongoing board capacity building?**

## Good News, Bad News

The good news is that you couldn't ask for a better group of students than the people who populate your average nonprofit board. The great majority of board members are avid lifelong learners who are sincerely committed to doing a top-notch job of governing.

The "bad" news is that many, if not most, board members are at least initially reluctant to make much of an investment in developing their own governing knowledge and skills once they've gone through the basic orientation for

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new board members. This is ironic when you think about the critical leadership role that we expect boards to play and their tremendous impact on organizational performance.

## The Executive (or Governance) Committee

If you want board members to pay close attention to a leadership function and really take it seriously, you'll want to assign it to a board standing committee. That's what many nonprofit boards have done with board education, usually making it a responsibility of the executive — or what many prefer to call governance — committee. Here's what the executive committee can do:

- **Develop a formal board education program** to orient members and provide them with continuing education. Set clear goals, lay out a detailed plan to achieve those goals, and commit the funds required to support the program. Update the program at least once a year.
- **Monitor the performance of the board education program, and**



make adjustments to produce stronger results.

## New Member Orientation

Obviously, you want incoming board members to understand the key operational features of the organization they're being asked to govern. But what they need more than anything else is a thorough orientation on the board itself. Make sure your orientation program includes information on:

- **the board's governing role** (a formal governing mission if there is one)
- **performance targets** (what's expected of individual board members)
- **committee structure** (the roles and detailed responsibilities of the standing committees)
- **the board's involvement** in such key processes as CEO evaluation, strategic planning, and budgeting.

## Continuing Education

Nonprofit governance is anything but a static field with hard and fast principles. Instead, every day that passes in this wild and wonderful (and relatively new!) field sees

yesterday's golden rules challenged, new principles proposed, and new techniques for generating higher-impact governance reported. Taking the time to keep your board members abreast of developments in this exciting field can serve two important purposes:

- **You can combat** the fatigue, boredom, and even burnout that can work against high-impact governing — motivating, inspiring, and energizing your board members by raising their sights above the trenches where much of their governing work takes place.

- **You can arm** your board members with information that they can put to practical use in updating the board's governing design. For example, dramatic developments in the field of strategic planning provide board members with opportunities to play a creative role in leading strategic change, rather than merely thumbing through a finished tome on its way to a dusty shelf. ■

### Resources

Eadie, Doug, "Can Standing Committees Contribute to High-Impact Governing?", *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 25, No. 2.

Martin, Marty, "To Govern Well, Create a Learning Agenda," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 25, No. 4.

Michalko, Michael, "Seven Creative Ways to Energize Your Board," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 16, No. 3.

Tschohl, John, "Training Programs Need More than Good Information," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 21, No. 2.

These resources are available at [www.snpo.org/members](http://www.snpo.org/members). Also see Learning Institute programs on-line: Board Governance ([www.snpo.org/li](http://www.snpo.org/li)).

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*The author of many books on nonprofit leadership, Doug Eadie is the founder and CEO of Doug Eadie & Company (www.DougEadie.com, Doug@DougEadie.com, 800-209-7652), a firm specializing in building high-impact board-CEO partnerships. His book High-Impact Governing in a Nutshell is available through ASAE at www.asaenet.org. His newest book is Meeting the Governance Challenge (Governance Edge, www.GovernanceEdge.com).*

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### Meet the Author

On Wednesday, December 5, 2007, from 1:00-2:30 p.m. EST, the Society for Nonprofit Organizations will host an online course, "Meeting the Governing Challenge," instructed by Doug Eadie. You'll learn practical methods to build board accountability, ways to use standing committees effectively, and the key elements of high-impact governing work.

The course will be conducted live in a "Webinar" format (Internet + conference call), complete with text chat capabilities. To encourage implementation of the techniques being taught, you're encouraged to bring other colleagues/co-workers to this training.

As a member of the Society, you can attend this course at a special rate of \$69 (reduced from \$99). To learn more, visit <http://www.snpo.org/courses/eadie.php?cd=SNPO3752>. If you have any questions, contact Jason Chmura, the Society's membership director, at 734-451-3582.

P.S. If you missed the live presentation of Debbie Mason's "Developing a Winning Communications Plan" or Terrie Temkin's "Communicating Expectations that Raise the Bar for the Board," note that these presentations were recorded and can be ordered online at <http://www.snpo.org/courses/register.php?cd=SNPO3752>.

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