

Effective Director Orientation By Beth Deazeley

The Question:

What orientation should we provide for new directors joining the board?

The Answer:

In *The Management of Nonprofit and Charitable Organizations in Canada*, Vic Murray writes:

*Two of the most important reasons that boards fail to perform effectively is that their members do not know what is expected of them or lack the skill and knowledge needed to make good decisions.*¹

Thorough and thoughtful orientation of new directors is key to helping them realize their full potential as valuable and contributing members of the board. Conversely, a lack of attention to orientation, or an impersonal or perfunctory process can set the stage for confusion, frustration and wasted opportunities.

A Personalized Process

Director orientation is part of a process that begins when a potential director is being considered for membership on the board. It should continue through the orientation stage and lead into ongoing director education and director and board assessment.

Responsibility for director orientation should be clearly assigned. On many boards, the chair of the governance and nominating committee or membership committee fulfills this role.

Prospective board members will receive certain information regarding the organization and expectations of directors as part of the recruitment process. Once they have officially joined the board, more detailed information should be provided.

Although much of the information included in the orientation process is standard and will be provided to all new directors, some personalization and tailoring of the information provided can dramatically increase the effectiveness of the orientation process.

During the recruitment process, the board will have become aware of the new director's skills and experiences, and should also be able to identify areas in which extra education or orientation may be helpful. For example, a long-term volunteer or former staff member joining the board will likely have intimate knowledge of the organization, but may appreciate additional education around the role and procedures of the board. Other new directors may have many years of board experience but be less familiar with the organization. Directors recruited from the business world bring valuable skill sets, but may find that additional orientation regarding the non-profit sector is of assistance.

¹ Murray, Vic, Ed. *The Management of Nonprofit and Charitable Organizations in Canada*, 2nd Ed. LexisNexis Canada Inc. 2009.

Orientation to the Organization

New directors should receive orientation and information relating to the organization and also to the board. Important information about the organization includes:

- the mandate of the organization and its mission, vision and values
- its membership, stakeholders and communities served
- the organization's stage of development (startup, growth, established) and some key points from its history
- strategic direction as well as short- and long-term goals
- major risks facing the organization and strategies for dealing with them
- organizational structure and key staff positions
- funding and accountabilities
- services provided / activities and programs

Orientation to the Board

New directors should also receive information on the board and its processes as well as detailed expectations of directors.

Key information about the board may include:

- the board's mandate and areas of responsibility
- board organization - officers, committee structure etc.
- terms of directors, committee membership, chairs etc.
- board work plan, including current projects and priorities
- board culture and protocols relating to motions, voting, agenda, telephone participation etc.

Expectations of directors should be clearly set out and may include:

- meeting attendance
- availability for unscheduled meetings and phone calls
- committee participation and board work done outside regular meetings
- a personal financial commitment by way of donations or membership dues
- participation in fundraising activities and / or attendance at major events
- use of personal / professional networks
- recruiting future board members
- serving as an ambassador of the organization

Written Orientation Materials – the Board Manual

The main tool used by most not-for-profit organizations to orient new directors is the board manual, which is often a binder containing the documents referred to below. It is important that the board manual be updated regularly so as to stay current. It should also be easy to read. It is important to strike a balance: providing sufficient information while not overwhelming new directors with excessive detail. Summary information can be useful in some areas, but is not recommended for key documents such as by-laws.

The board manual often includes:

- articles of incorporation / letters patent
- by-laws
- annual report(s) and financial statements
- minutes from recent board meetings
- information regarding insurance (including directors' and officers' liability coverage)
- annual fundraising plan and list of major funders
- operating budget
- promotional material and website information
- annual strategic plan
- board's current year work priorities and plan, including schedule of upcoming meetings, AGM and retreats
- policies including confidentiality, conflict of interest, investments, etc.
- organizational chart
- profiles and contact information for senior staff and board members
- board and committee mandates
- director position descriptions

Some organizations also include educational material such as articles or links to further information on the organization, the not-for-profit sector, and/or board governance. This can be a way to tailor the orientation package to the specific needs of the new director.

Live Orientation

The board manual is an excellent resource; however, human interaction also plays a key role in the orientation process. To meet fellow board members and get a sense of the board's culture, the practice of having prospective directors observe a board meeting prior to joining can be helpful.

Once on the board, one option to help acclimatize new directors is to assign them a mentor who can help acquaint them with the board and answer any questions which may arise. This is an excellent opportunity to tailor the orientation process to the particular incoming director by providing them with a mentor who is experienced in the particular areas in which they may have questions.

A new director should also meet the executive director or CEO, and may also meet key staff members. A visit to see the organization's front-line operations can go a long way towards providing a greater understanding of the organization and also bolstering a new director's commitment to the cause.

The Importance of Following Up

The director orientation process should not end once the new board member has received a copy of the manual and shaken hands with fellow directors and senior staff. Follow-up is critical to the success of the process.

If the new director has been assigned a mentor, that person should initiate informal contact between board meetings for the first few months to address any questions. If there is no mentor assigned, a member of the governance and nominating or membership committee may fulfill the same role.

It can also be helpful to conduct a review once the new director has been on the board for six months or so to assess their comfort level and also get feedback from them about the effectiveness of the orientation they received.

The materials used for director orientation will also form the basis of the director's future development. This may be done as part of a tailored development plan addressing issues such as ongoing education, committee rotations etc. In addition, orientation materials such as director position descriptions and expectations and the mandates of the board and its committees can form the basis for evaluation of directors and the board as a whole.

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