



A Guide to Board Orientation

BY E. GRANT MACDONALD

1. INTRODUCTION

Board orientation refers to a process for helping new directors contribute fully, and as early in their tenure as possible, to the governing work of the board. The following guide outlines the objectives that might be considered, who should lead the process and how an orientation program might be structured.

Board orientation is not just about the transfer of information. As a result of their orientation new directors should:

- ┆ Understand their roles, responsibilities and time commitment to governance work around the board and committee table and away from it
- ┆ Be aware of the current goals, opportunities and challenges facing the organization
- ┆ Be aware of who the organization's main stakeholders are including members, funders, clients, partners, the public, as well as staff
- ┆ Have some sense of how their own background, knowledge, experience and skills will contribute to the current work of the board and the goals of the organization
- ┆ Appreciate the background, knowledge, experience and skills of each of the other directors
- ┆ Know how board meetings are run, decisions are made and what formal governing policies and practices exist
- ┆ Appreciate how this board functions similarly or differently than other boards they have served on or are serving on

A list of specific topics or information items could be developed under each of these learning objectives and may include an overview of the board's legal responsibilities, director job descriptions, fundraising obligations and communication protocols.

While it is common to think of a board orientation as an event – perhaps a part of a regular board meeting or a special orientation session, it is more useful to understand it as a process that starts with director prospecting, recruitment and election and then involves some kind of orientation session or meeting.

2. FIRST STEP: DIRECTOR RECRUITMENT, APPLICATION AND SELECTION

Board orientation ought to begin when a person is being considered as a potential board member. At the very least the recruitment and application process should assist a new board member in understanding:

- ┆ Why their expertise and skills, and which ones in particular, would be valuable assets to the board and to the organization
- ┆ Some of the current challenges and opportunities facing the organization
- ┆ The time commitment required of them
- ┆ That the organization is competently run, including sound financial management

And if they are relatively new to board and governance work then further information should be provided on:

- ┆ Their roles and responsibilities as a board member
- ┆ Any special roles and responsibilities associated with being a representative of a particular stakeholder or constituency.

Some or all of this information may be communicated in the recruitment process, a process that ought to include some kind of interview or vetting procedure. Many organizations will develop a board recruitment package for board candidates. Often board candidates will already be familiar with the organization because they are a member or program volunteer. Depending on their degree of familiarity with the organization, you may want to focus your orientation program more on their role as a board member rather than the programs, services and management workings of the organization.

3. NEXT STEPS: SPECIAL MEETINGS

Once someone has been recruited, nominated, interviewed and selected to serve on the board, the next step is a more thorough orientation. This might involve some or all of these measures:

- ┆ Providing the new directors with a board manual
- ┆ Organizing a special orientation workshop session
- ┆ Meeting with the CEO
- ┆ Meeting with board chair
- ┆ Touring facilities and offices

4. RESPONSIBILITY FOR BOARD ORIENTATION

a) The board recruitment, nominations or governance committee

The director recruitment process ought to incorporate some agreed upon elements of board orientation. The committee's responsibility, or that of any individual approaching a potential director candidate, is to provide some information about the organization and acquire some essential information about the candidate's main interests.

b) Board chair

The board chair should have an overview of the orientation process and should expect to play a significant role. This could include:

- ┆ Helping author and sign a letter of invitation to prospective board members
- ┆ Contacting new board members by telephone or e-mail to personally welcome them to the board
- ┆ Leading the portion of the orientation on the board's role, decision-making, committees and board-staff communication, and perhaps public policy advocacy and ambassadorship. The chair should be the one to talk to new board members about the culture of the board and its unwritten rules and practices.

c) The CEO

Although the CEO is often the most knowledgeable person about the organization, board orientation should be balanced between organizational information and information about board or governance practices. The CEO should be responsible for orienting new board members on those matters over which she/he is responsible. This may include summarizing programs and services, staff roles, financial management, the budgeting process, core policies and procedures, as well as facilities and offices.

Ideally board orientation, once the new board members have been confirmed, is a collaborative effort between the board chair and CEO.

d) The Whole Board

Just as the needs of the board guides the recruitment process and requires a board level conversation, so too does the orientation process.

The whole board also has responsibilities that include welcoming new board members, showing up at an orientation session if they can, and most importantly, mentoring new board members. Apart from assigning or seeking volunteers to serve as mentors, there should be some discussion of what the mentoring expectations will be.¹

5. INFORMATION NEEDS OF NEW BOARD MEMBERS

It is important not to overwhelm new directors immediately with new information, especially a binder full of organizational documents, such as a board manual. They should receive some materials in the recruitment process, others when they are accepted to the board and then given the chance to review a number of others in the lead up to, and in the conduct of, an orientation session. Other materials they should be expected to review on their own.

The board and its recruitment committee should go over a list like the one below and decide on what documents new directors should be exposed to and at what point in the process. A list similar to this, with a section for up-to-date governance policies, also constitutes the contents of a comprehensive board members' manual.

Checklist of Key Board Documents

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|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Mission, vision and values statement | <input type="checkbox"/> Strategic plan (executive summary at least) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Board member job description | <input type="checkbox"/> Board meeting agenda and minutes (several examples) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Incorporation by-laws | <input type="checkbox"/> Board member and senior staff contact list |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Director contract/confidentiality agreement | <input type="checkbox"/> Committee terms of reference |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Conflict of interest policy | <input type="checkbox"/> Board chair job description |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Board code of conduct policy | <input type="checkbox"/> CEO job description |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Board calendar | <input type="checkbox"/> Media or public relations policy |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Committee list | <input type="checkbox"/> Director travel re-imbursement policy |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Annual report or audited financial statements | <input type="checkbox"/> List of abbreviations and acronyms commonly used in the field |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Current budget | <input type="checkbox"/> List of government legislation that is particularly relevant to the work of the organization |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Organizational chart | |

¹For a valuable resource on the mentoring role of board members see: Heather McFarlane, Board Mentoring Handbook, Toronto, Maytree Foundation, 2007. A link to this resource may be found in the Roles and responsibilities key resource page in ICD's Not-for-Profit Resource Centre.

6. TOPICS TO BE COVERED IN BOARD ORIENTATION PROCESS

1. Mission, values, history and distinguishing features of the organization, reputational advantages.
2. Overview of key stakeholders (members, funders, government, sister service providers and competitors) and relationships to them.
3. Strategic priorities or plans, goals and current challenges (industry trends, environmental scan, public policy environment).
4. Legal, fundraising, ethical and advocacy responsibilities of the board, including responsibilities associated with the organization's charitable status.
5. Type of board, the board's role, board decision procedures, board culture, board committees and board member and board-staff communications. The representational duties for constituency-based boards should also be reviewed.
6. Summary of programs and services, program level objectives, community and client outcomes, success measures and evaluation.
7. CEO and staff roles and human resource practices.
8. Revenues, expenses, reserves, fundraising costs, financial management, and the board role in budgeting process.
9. By-laws and other policies and procedures in place; review practices.

7. EVALUATION

The last stage of orientation is assessing the effectiveness of the orientation process itself. Approximately 8-12 weeks after new directors have completed the orientation program, the board chair or governance committee chair should follow up with new directors and possibly their mentors to get feedback on what worked well and to gather suggestions for improvement.

The orientation process could also be assessed as part of a annual board self-evaluation with a rating question such as "how useful did you find your board orientation" or an open-ended question like: "given what you know now about the work of the board, what would you have liked to have known when you started as a director?"

BOARD ORIENTATION PLANNING MATRIX

(This example is just partially filled in. Because each subject or topic area is broad, boards are encouraged to create a more detailed matrix, perhaps sub-dividing each area and adding additional rows)

Subject/topic	Recruitment Phase	Meeting with Board Chair	Meeting with CEO	Board Orientation Session	Other
1. Mission, values and distinguishing features of the organization					
2. Key stakeholders and relationships					
3. Strategic priorities and goals	Current challenges				
4. Legal, ethical and fundraising responsibilities		Partially covered			
5. Board role and functioning	Director roles and responsibilities	Partially covered			
6. Programs and services, outcomes					
7. CEO and staff roles and HR Practices			CEO job description		
8. Financial management	Annual Report				
9. By-laws and other policies					
Introduction to other directors		Partially covered			
Key documents <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ┆ By-laws ┆ Code of conduct ┆ Conflict of interest ┆ Director agreement 		Code of Conduct			

Sources:

This resource owes inspiration from many sources, most particularly the following document: Province of New Brunswick, The Department of Wellness, Culture and Sport, Board Orientation Strategies: Tips, Tools and Resources Designed to Get Your Board into Top Gear Quickly, no date. A link to this resource may be found in the Roles and responsibilities key resource page in ICD's Not-for-Profit Resource Centre.

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This publication was developed for ICD by E. Grant MacDonald, a Halifax-based non-profit governance consultant and former organizational behaviour professor at Dalhousie University. It may not be used or distributed in another form without expressed written permission.

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