



Join. Engage. Unite.

# Get Your Board on Board

Empower Strategic Decision Making  
and Get Things Done



According to a 2017 George Mason University survey, nearly a third (31 percent) of incoming association and nonprofit board members were not oriented in their organization's strategic plan<sup>1</sup>.

Additionally, a recent study by ASAE (Associations Innovate: The Journey from Intent to Action) reported moderate levels of board engagement in creating the innovation agenda, with ratings averaging 3.33 on a scale of one to five.<sup>2</sup>

This finding indicates that while association boards are engaging strategically, they have the capacity to do more.

### Why aren't they?



While boards should exercise care, show loyalty and demonstrate a commitment to your organization's mission, they can be doing more strategic work. They have the capacity to not just work with staff on the details or pet programs but to provide perspective to drive your organization forward. It's probably part of why they're on your board. It helps them stay engaged. And gaining support from your board can be imperative as you look to support new projects and investments that will make your organization better – for your staff and for your members.

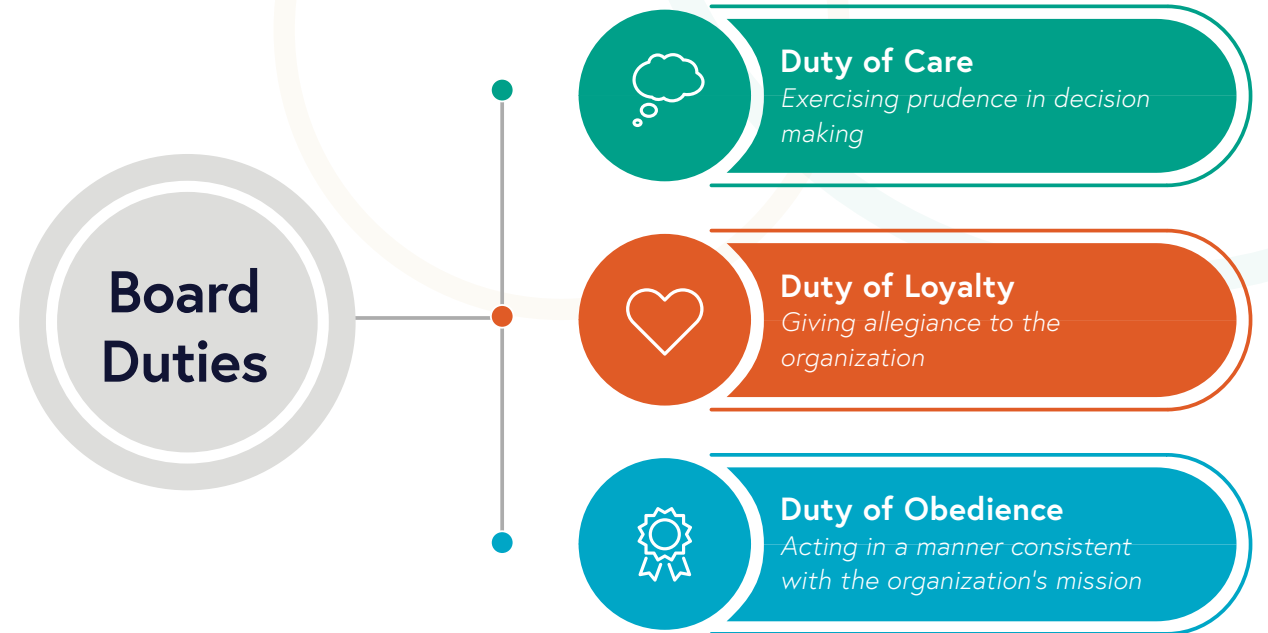
Whether you're wanting to build out a new program, secure additional funding or maybe even eliminate projects currently draining staff time and money--getting your board on board is critical.



# The Role of Your Organization's Board of Directors

Your board may have many duties but at the core, they include:

- **The duty of care:** to be thoughtful in making good decisions on behalf of the organization.
- **The duty of loyalty:** being committed to the organization.
- **The duty of obedience:** acting in a manner consistent with the organization's mission.



According to the ASAE study, high-performing boards are twice as likely to spend time on strategic projects and 99% of these boards developed their organizational plans WITH staff and, as a result, the organization had<sup>3</sup>:

- Healthier membership
- Better budgets
- More stability in their leadership, meaning that CEOs and other executives were less likely to burn out

I would suggest that in addition to the board duties of care, loyalty and obedience, introduce **the duty of foresight**. It's a declaration about how important it is that you work together – board and staff – on the initiatives that will transform your organization.



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# The Need for Foresight

This additional duty lays the groundwork for a productive relationship and sets the expectation that you need, and want, their perspective on strategic initiatives. The board knows to expect that you'll be coming to them with big questions.

The need for foresight forces the board to understand the impact of events and trends that will influence the organization and challenges them to take control of them for the benefit of the organization and stakeholders.

Foresight then is an essential strategic duty and a moral obligation. For associations to survive and thrive in a time of constant change, board leaders need to develop a clear-eyed and disciplined focus on the future. The duty of foresight is a responsibility that boards must embrace now.

**Here's how we get them there.**



# The Importance of Telling Your Story

At the highest level, preparation for a board meeting includes three components, two of which we'll cover at a high-level and then a third we'll spend more time on:

- 1 Know your audience and understand their background and knowledge.** They may be on your board but are not necessarily a CFO or a CTO. When you're talking to them, ensure that you're not throwing around jargon that may distract them at best or alienate them at worst.
- 2 Have your story down.** Be able to explain the problem you're hoping to solve, and be clear and concise. Keep in mind that less is more.
- 3 Focus on ROI.**



**1** Understand their background and knowledge and lose the lingo.

**3** Align with the strategic plan and focus on facts.

**2** Explain the problem and be clear and concise. Less is more.



## Know Your Audience

The chances are excellent that you know the members of your board but thinking about your ask and tailoring it for your audience is always a good thing to do. Audiences bring with them expectations about the occasion, topic and speaker. If you do not meet the expectations of a particular audience, it can negatively impact the effectiveness of your presentation.

Also, take into consideration the audience's knowledge of the topic at hand. This can vary widely on any given occasion and communicators should find out what their audience already knows about a particular topic. Never overestimate the audience's knowledge of the information that you are sharing.

There are other factors to think about including the audience's attitude towards the topic, their demographics, egocentricity and role. All of these considerations can help you find your voice and your approach.





## Know Your Story

When thinking about the story that you will share with the board, a great place to start is to align your story with your strategic plan.

You do these things to create the relevance necessary to engage the board, create foresight and ensure you're aligning it with the goals you've created together. When you are asking for their support, whether it's budget for a new technology purchase or services to help you do more, everything must align with the strategic plan.

- What are you asking for?
- Why are you asking for it?
- How will it get accomplished?
- How will it be funded?

Warren Buffet famously remarked that, "It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it." Planning is everything and preparation is key. When you engage with your board, take those interactions seriously and prepare for them.



**"It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it."**

*-- Warren Buffett*



## Focus on ROI

The focus on the ROI is undoubtedly the most compelling way to get the board on your side. When preparing for a meeting with your board, always ask yourself, how does this help us:



Grow revenue



Increase engagement



Streamline work



Create a clear view of organizational health



Reduce costs

Your initiatives and requests may only do one or two of these things, or they may do several.





### **Grow Revenue**

Members of your board are invested in ensuring that your organization has the funding it needs to grow and succeed. If you are attempting to get your board on board with a new project, explore with them how it helps you grow dues revenue and non-dues revenue. Does it help you expand your reach? Does it give you the ability to enter new geographies? Are you able to deliver additional value that can be used to justify a dues increase? Can it help you drive more from your events? Does it help you expand those events, delivering additional programming that will help you drive revenue? Will it amplify your organization's ability to fundraise?



### **Increase Engagement**

What is the overall of your new project or request, and how does it help you deepen relationships with constituents? Are you able to better target a specific segment? Will it improve participation in your programming? Will the project support increased engagement help you drive retention and, therefore, increase your revenue?



### **Streamline Work**

Make sure to quantify how your requests will optimize your organization's operations or reduce the workload for current staff. And, as a result, how would time savings be reinvested?



### **Organizational Health**

Your board should be looking at the long-term strategy for the organization and thinking carefully about how they will continue to attract, engage and retain followers not just this year, but five years from now. You can increase your chances for success by framing how your project delivers long-term value and provide a clear view of organizational health.



### **Reduce Costs**

At the end of the day, your board wants to see justification of how this project will reduce costs and improve the organization's impact. How will your request lead to reduced costs? What is the opportunity for reinvestment?



# How to Build Coalitions

If you find that one of the board members responds favorably to your pitch when you give it to them one-on-one, see if they'll agree to be your advocate.

Staff executives need a strategy champion on the board to make the case to fellow members. They can help you determine a number of important factors, including:

- Blind spots in your pitch that might need improvement
- What board members' primary concerns might be
- Questions that other board members might ask
- Areas where you might need to do further research
- If your idea is well founded or needs significant rework

They are especially likely to be convinced if that recommendation comes from one of their own.



**Staff executives need a  
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# Get your Board on Board

## Set the Stage

Send the agenda in advance and ask for "pre-calls" to confirm additions or edits to the board agenda. If you get your strategy deck completed in advance, it's also worth sending.

In some of the best run board meetings, the CEO will hold brief phone calls with each non-executive board member in advance to walk through the financials and align on the agenda.

This is important for a few reasons. You ensure that every board member understands your performance and is ready for a discussion on the day of the meeting. You can learn what they really think about the critical decisions you need to make. And, if a board member disagrees with a decision, you can understand why. Finally, if you want their support for a difficult decision, you can figure out where they stand in advance.

Think of your pre-meeting akin to how a congressional whip "counts the vote." Pre-calls also help you with building rapport so that you're more in control of the room when you're all together.



## During the Main Event

Be aware of your biases about who should be making what decisions in your board/executive-director relationship. Maybe you think that the board should make all of the difficult decisions? Maybe you think that the board should simply "rubber stamp" the recommendations of the executive director?

Give voice to these biases and dare to challenge them. Are they serving your organization?

Manage your fear of rejection and conflict, both of which are prevalent within the familial environment that is typical of nonprofits. Ask yourself, "What's the worst thing that can happen if I'm honest about the decisions I want to make?" In most cases, nothing will happen, but you'll feel more powerful for making the effort.

Take a careful inventory of the decisions that should be made by the board or have significant board input. Write them down. This is your opportunity to get granular: What do you want the board to decide, and what decisions do you want to be made by your executive director? If you think that decision making between the board and your executive director is murky, say so. Summon your strength and acknowledge this confusion in clear and concise language. Advocate for the board or the executive director to be the decision maker. An example of effective language is, "This decision is important to our organization and I want to advocate that the (fill in the blank: board or executive director) make it."

## HOW TO STRUCTURE YOUR BOARD MEETING

- ◉ **Framing**  
*Defining the situation; describing and interpreting an event*
- ◉ **History**  
*Provide context and background to ensure all parties are on the same page*
- ◉ **Due Diligence**  
*Articulate the process whereby options were identified, investigated and evaluated*
- ◉ **Options**  
*Presentation of options for consideration*
- ◉ **Questions**  
*Opportunity to ask questions. Great chance to highlight issues raised during 1:1 conversations.*
- ◉ **Conversation**  
*Facilitation of board conversation, led by advocate. Executive role is to listen.*
- ◉ **Decision/Next Steps**  
*Final decision or communication of timeline, next steps*



# Wrapping Up

We've shared that your board has multiple duties including:

- **Duty of care:** exercising prudence in decision making
- **Duty of loyalty:** giving allegiance to the organization
- **Duty of obedience:** acting in a manner consistent with the organization's mission
- **Duty of foresight:** making the affirmative choice to look continuously toward the future

The duty of foresight is an important addition because it is a declaration of how important is it that you work together—board and staff—on the initiatives that will transform your organization.

## Remember to prepare for your board meeting using these three components:



Know your audience and understand their background and knowledge. They may be on your board but are not necessarily a CFO or a CTO. When you are presenting to them, ensure that you're not throwing around jargon that may distract them at best or alienate them at worst.



Know your story. Be able to explain the problem you're hoping to solve. Be clear and concise and keep in mind that less is always more.



Focus on the return on investment for the projects and requests that you are sharing in the meeting.



# About Personify

Personify is the market-leading Constituent Management and Engagement (CME) platform that empowers modern organizations to better engage their constituents, maximize revenue and optimize operations. For over 20 years, Personify has served as the technology foundation for organizations of all sizes from the largest associations, charities, YMCAs and JCCs to emerging nonprofits. For additional information, [www.personifycorp.com](http://www.personifycorp.com).





# References

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