

# How to Increase Nonprofit Board Engagement



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# Engaged boards are more effective

For most nonprofit teams, the board represents a double-edged sword. On one side, board members are well-connected, savvy individuals who want to help increase the success of a nonprofit and help grow its presence in the community. On the other hand, however, this mutually beneficial success is only possible if the board members are engaged and personally involved in the mission and strategy of the organization.

While easy to talk about and think about in the abstract sense, it's more challenging to actually get your board members to show up. This educational ebook will explore how nonprofit boards have reached their current heights of importance and why keeping board members engaged matters. We'll also discuss some best practices for getting your board members more engaged.

## WHAT DOES ENGAGEMENT MEAN?

When it comes to joining a nonprofit board, it's not enough to simply sign up and write a

check or two every year. What often happens is that a handful of board members are left shouldering a majority of the day-to-day responsibilities while the rest offer a few ideas, attend a couple of meetings, and show up to the annual gala. For nonprofits in today's economic landscape, partial participation won't cut it. According to a recent Leading With Intent study, 68% of board members say that their board is not a collaborative team working toward a shared goal. In other words, the majority of boards are functioning more like random groups of individuals than as actual teams.

Legally, nonprofit board members have a few duties they are obligated to complete in order to be on the board. These fiduciary duties include things like reviewing financial statements and presenting to committees, but there are other ways nonprofits need board members to step in and become involved. For nonprofits, however, pushing board member engagement can mean walking a thin line. While you want to leverage board members to the best of your ability and maximize the



opportunities they can deliver to your team, you also don't want to scare them away with too many requests.

From attending and participating in both board and committee meetings, to leading fundraising and giving campaigns, to organizing and running volunteer engagements, board member involvement can be complex. Depending on the size and scope of your nonprofit, the level of engagement required from board members may vary. For example, if you're running a newer or smaller team, your board members will probably be more hands-on by necessity, since you most likely have fewer staff members and employees. Larger teams, by contrast, will probably have a board that's more involved solely in top-level issues and engagements.

As you're figuring out how to increase board engagement, take a step back and evaluate how involved you want your board to be. Do you want them to have a say in day-to-day proceedings? Or do you want them to pitch in at more events and activities? Write down the desired scope of engagement for a solid reference point down the road.

### WHY DOES BOARD ENGAGEMENT MATTER?

At the heart of board engagement is a single goal: moving the brand and mission of a nonprofit forward. The board is separate from the day-to-day management of a nonprofit for a reason. Instead of getting bogged down in the minute details and implementation of ideas, the board is responsible for generating

ideas and developing strategy to move the nonprofit forward. Whether this means raising money, hosting events, or increasing media coverage, the board is in charge of making it happen. If your nonprofit is working with an out-of-touch board or if your board members are unresponsive, then your employees and volunteers won't have any direction behind their day-to-day actions.

Additionally, boards are responsible for making large-scale decisions about the overarching operations of your organization. If they're not aware of the results you're seeing across the organization, or if they prioritize one need over another due to lack of insight, there can be long-term consequences.



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# Three steps to increase board engagement

With a better understanding of what board engagement means and why it's so important to the long-term success of a nonprofit, it's time to take action. Here are three practical ways to increase board engagement without simply asking for more money:

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## Evaluate board performance on a regular basis

Evaluating board performance is one of the best ways to jump-start board engagement in a big way. Unfortunately, performance evaluation isn't a widespread practice—more than 36 percent of nonprofit boards never take the time to evaluate their own performance. Evaluation measures how well boards handle a few critical issues: engaging with investors, staff/employee relations, and whether or not the board has turned the lens inwards on itself. If a board evaluation turns up that your board is unengaged or lacking in any specific areas, your team can start looking for alternative methods and avenues, such as ways to engage them beyond the board room.



There are a few ways to organize a board evaluation process. You can either do a self-evaluation, with all members participating and evaluating both themselves and each other, or select a committee to conduct the evaluation. Typically, if your board has never done an evaluation before, you'll want to hire an outside consultant or team to come in and lead the process. This will provide an unbiased, third-party perspective.

To decide what to include in the evaluation itself, it's good to start wide and give each broad topic some qualifying criteria. This way, you're not merely asking, "Does Brian show up for meetings," but seeking more in-depth information like, "Does Brian bring strategic ideas to the table during meetings?" Look at how your board members manage the overall mission of the nonprofit, how the board as a whole operates (and how individual members add value), and whether or not members are involved in the legal, financial, and strategic efforts of the board.

Once you understand how your current board members are performing, you can begin to see areas for improvement. If there are certain board members who are less engaged, work with them one on one to bring them up to speed. If some board members are completely dropping their duties (including their legally required ones), it might be time to have a tough conversation about whether they can/should remain on the board. By evaluating your current board performance, you gain a clearer picture of how to move forward.

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## **Make volunteering and fundraising a mandatory part of the board position**

This engagement best practice is more general, but it is surprising how few boards actually require in-person involvement from their boards. If your board needs a jolt of involvement quickly, set up a board-led volunteer day with families and friends. This activity will both give board members somewhere to meet outside the conference room as well as create a casual, social environment where board members can bond as friends, not just colleagues.

The fundraising issue can be a little tricky. It's not uncommon for board members to shy away from fundraising efforts, even



though the task is an important part of the business. Engaging board members in fundraising doesn't necessarily mean you're asking them for money, nor does it mean you're hounding their networks for money—although that is definitely what many board members envision when they think of fundraising.

Instead, think of more creative ways to use your biggest power players. Put your board members on the phones calling local VIPs and heavy hitters. Have them conduct interviews with media leaders about your current campaigns or mission. You can even ask them to share campaign details with their social networks, where the environment tends to be more casual.

Outside of one-off events, it is possible to make involvement in volunteering and fundraising efforts a mandatory part of your board positions. This ensures that every board member, regardless of when they joined, will know upfront what his or her responsibilities are. This is a space to have fun and be creative as well. Set up a fundraising campaign specifically for new board members, or have the board brainstorm year-long volunteer ideas that your employees can work from. Having a hands-on responsibility with the nonprofit will remind board members why they chose to become involved with your organization in the first place.

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## Streamline meeting planning and updates

And finally, the best way to increase board engagement, involvement, and communication is to make it easier for members to participate on the board. Think about their daily lives: They don't want to run around playing email tag with 20 people trying to nail down a time for the monthly board meeting. Once they're at meetings, they don't want to sit around for 10 minutes while someone locates the previous meeting minutes. It's all about ensuring that board members have a seamless, enjoyable, productive experience.

Instead of sending out a SurveyMonkey or Google Form for members to suggest ideas and then manually loading



responses into a spreadsheet to email out to board members, look for a tool that integrates all critical functions into a single workflow. Nonprofit teams and board leaders can automatically pull members' calendars and schedules into one solution for seamless meeting scheduling.

Having a single source of truth for all your board meeting todos can keep members engaged and focused on the tasks at hand. Members can vote in polls, add notes, record ideas, see supplemental documents, and even view meeting attendance with the click of a button. Since many between-meeting touchpoints take place over computers and not face to face, members can even comment and send messages through a secure interface to quickly chat about new ideas or questions.

With the right tools in place, your board members will be more engaged—and more productive—which can increase the output and success of your nonprofit. Regardless of the size, shape, or age of your board, engagement is a critical factor and a necessity. Having a strong audit process, clear engagement guidelines, and the right solutions in place can help increase board engagement and develop a long-term culture of involvement.

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# About Boardable

**Built by Nonprofit leaders, for Nonprofits.** Boardable empowers you to work more effectively with your boards and committees. We know the frustration you feel (and the hours you lose) just from organizing a meeting via email, phone, and text. We've lived it. We're from the nonprofit world, too. After looking around for the right tool but not finding it, we decided to build it. Boardable is a software platform that centralizes all communication between you and your board. Find the best meeting times, securely store all of your documents, archive discussion threads and more—all in one place.

For more information, to schedule a demo, or to sign up for your FREE 30-day trial, visit us at [boardable.com](http://boardable.com)



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