

KEEPING BOARD MEMBERS INVOLVED

Board members want and need to feel a personal connection to the agency and its services, but it takes inspiration to keep them active and engaged. As board members realize the significant difference they make, they will become more involved. Boards serve themselves best when they keep in mind members' own hopes and aspirations in deciding how to involve them in the board's activities. Try to link people with activities that will help them achieve their own goals as well as those of the agency. The two checklists below can help you to consider what your agency is currently doing that enhances or blocks board member involvement. Check each item that you believe deserves focus during future board development efforts.

Ways to Enhance Involvement

1. ____ Give members a specific job to do. Participation on standing committees, task forces, and groups working on shorter-term projects can make the difference between feeling connected to a worthwhile endeavor and being a detached spectator.
2. ____ Make it clear from the start that everyone is expected to participate and follow through on their assignments and that they will be held accountable. Doing this reinforces that their work is important. Not doing it sends just the opposite message.
3. ____ Encourage people to get involved in areas where they can use their expertise, but also give them opportunities for learning, personal growth, and leadership development.
4. ____ Be sure that the work is well dispersed among board members. If too much power and decision making lies with the board chair or a few select board members, other members may lose interest.
5. ____ Encourage new board members to ask questions, offer opinions, and provide feedback. This provides them opportunities to make important contributions early in their board tenure. Because they are seeing the board and the organization with new eyes they are in the best position to bring new perspectives to your work.
6. ____ Structure your board meetings so that members feel their time is well spent. Focus the meetings on strategic issues rather than “administrivia” and create opportunities for extensive member participation.
7. ____ Plan and provide special workshops or learning opportunities on topics such as affiliate services, public policy issues, fund raising, financial issues, etc.
8. ____ Involve members in board self-assessments. Taking part in simple meeting evaluations to full-fledged board evaluations can give people a chance to participate in some of the most fundamental work of the board and to help plan its future.
9. ____ Schedule annual retreats in order to bring everyone together to focus on important topics that can't be covered in regular board meetings because of time limitations or the need to deal with more urgent issues.

10. ____ Provide opportunities for members to become involved in the work of the affiliate outside of the board room. Some examples include making visits to elected officials, participating in fund raising events, planning public forums on affiliate issues, inviting the CEO to speak to their social or civic groups, etc.

Barriers to Board Involvement

1. ____ The board is too large. There is not enough work for each board member to do.
2. ____ The board is too small. Board members feel overwhelmed or suffer from insufficient stimulation or limited perspectives.
3. ____ The Executive Committee is too active. If it meets too often, or pre-processes issues coming before the board, the rest of the members may feel disengaged or like a rubber stamp.
4. ____ Agendas are weak. They lack substance or are too long. Board members fail to see the relevance of board meeting topics to affiliate plans or performance.
5. ____ Members don't feel well used or important. They'll decide that they have better things to do, places where their time and expertise will be better appreciated.
6. ____ There is little or no opportunity for discussion. Board members feel bored or frustrated.
7. ____ The board lacks social glue. Members have little in common except board service. No efforts are made to help people get to know each other and find out about common concerns and interests beyond those of the affiliate.
8. ____ Members aren't recognized for their contributions. Praise members for their efforts publicly and celebrate the successes of the board itself, not just the successes of the affiliate as a whole.
9. ____ The board has no work plan for itself. Without its own work plan it is difficult for members to be clear about the board's challenges and to measure its success separate from the success of the affiliate.
10. ____ New members receive insufficient or ineffective orientation. Their lack of understanding of the affiliate and its issues prevents them from fully participating in board work or effectively representing the affiliate in the community.