Fact Sheet: Educating and Developing Your Board

April 5, 2021

Board members are the heart of a foundation, and continuing to provide education and development opportunities is critical for boards to thrive and grow. Healthy boards find ways to stay curious, fuel their passions, pursue new knowledge, and refine foundation strategies and governance.

One of the basic principles of non-profit corporation law is that directors must meet certain standards of conduct and attention in carrying out their responsibilities to the organization. One standard is the "duty of care or competence," which describes the level of competence in exercising reasonable care when directors make decisions as stewards of the organization.

Educating and developing board members can be a challenge for even the most well-intentioned foundations. Board members' time and energy can be limited. Long-standing board members can grow increasingly comfortable in their roles, and grantmaking decisions and general business can easily fill agendas. However, ongoing learning is powerful and critical—not only to stay abreast of trends or benchmark foundation practices, but to fuel the engagement and passion that drive foundations toward impact.

Is your board making adequate investments in education and development, or is now the time to start?

Strategies for Educating and Developing Your Board

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Foundations use many strategies for learning, including site visits, collaborations with other funders, attending conferences, inviting speakers, and more. Here are other ways to help your board access ongoing information and inspiration.

Think beyond board orientation. It is good practice to have a process for orienting new board members to the foundation and their roles, from mission, vision, and culture to financial and legal duties to understanding the granting programs and fund development practices. See page 3 for a great orientation checklist that is used by the Community Foundation of Northwestern Alberta. Some foundations host a second orientation session for new board members six months after they have joined the board. At these sessions, the new members drive the agenda, as they know best what they don't know or what they need more information on, based on their first few board meetings.

Continue to create opportunities for open conversation and learning on a regular basis, even after orientation ends. Some community foundations adopt a board buddy program—pairing new board members with experienced ones—as a great way to encourage questioning and ongoing learning. The experienced board member checks in with their buddy after each board meeting to answer any questions or provide insight on issues discussed.

You also might set aside time for learning at each board meeting. Making time and space for learning will help ensure that the duty of care or competence is addressed on a regular basis.

Consider making it an expectation that board members dedicate a certain amount of time each year to learning. The Board Chair and the senior staff members could meet annually with each board member. During the meeting, the learning needs of the member can be identified, and a plan can be put in place to assist the board member as they address their needs. Given the time constraints on board members, collective opportunities to learn should be made a priority.

Annual board retreats are another opportunity for board development. Put questions on the table and have a healthy conversation about them.

If your foundation doesn't have a board education and development program and sees the value in having such a program, what would you need to put a program in place?

Leverage the board's interests and expertise. Learning and motivation can go hand in hand. What are you and your fellow board members curious about? What ideas or strategies raise the energy in the boardroom? Use these interests as entry points for ongoing learning.

Along the same lines, what expertise, perspectives, or experiences can each board member offer? What might each share to benefit the full group? For example, perhaps one board member is an exceptional listener, a skill that is critical in identifying points for leverage and impact. Set aside time at an upcoming meeting to interview the individual about their listening skills. What are their strategies? With what mindset do they approach interactions with others in the community?

If your board includes members with expertise in legal, financial, or fiduciary matters, you might ask them to present to the full board, circulate an article to spark discussion, or call on their contacts to educate the board in more detail.

Survey the board to determine their education needs. Consider surveying board members with a list of potential topics that align with the strategic plan or with Community Foundation of Canada priorities or information on community trends impacting the foundation's work. Include an open-ended question for board members to suggest topics.

Enlist a board member to facilitate board education and development. Who on your board has responsibility for advancing the knowledge and skills of the full board? This individual (board chair or another member) may choose to meet one-on-one with board members to explore their interests, discuss challenges, or offer support in getting the information they need to excel in their roles. They may also choose to request time on meeting agendas for learning as a full group.

Keep in mind: Each board member is ultimately responsible for his or her education and development. Let folks know they can speak up if they are not receiving the training, information, or support they need, even if to say they are unsure of their needs.

Seize small, virtual, or large opportunities for learning. The Learning Institute, offered by Community Foundations of Canada, offers ongoing educational experiences and learning resources tailored to directors' and the foundation's needs. The website has a great search function, by category, with links to documents, fact sheets, guides, and webinars. https://www.communityfoundations.ca/about-learning-institute/. CFC also hosts a biennial conference with a variety of topics for foundations of all sizes.

Unlock the power of cross-pollination. The ideas you encounter and experiences you have in other walks of life can make a remarkable impact on your role as a foundation board member. Do not hesitate to bring them into the board room.

Do you sit on another non-profit board? Perhaps their governance practices are ones that you would like to share with the foundation's board. Are there some best practices that would make sense learning more about to see if these would be relevant to your foundation.

Ben Franklin said that, "the investment in knowledge always pays the best interest". Foundations invest their financial capital to build their endowments. What better way to build their human capital then through investing in the education of their directors.

Board Orientation Checklist

Name:	**Signature:**	
Date Appointed to the Board:	**Date Orientation Started:**	**Date Completed:**

Provide General Information	Provided by:	Date/Initial
History of the organization	CEO	
Overview of Operational Areas	CEO	
Organizational / Board / Staff / Committee Structure & Function I.e. Ambassadors and Community Representation	CEO	
Board Orientation which includes: ▪ Memorandum of Association ▪ Certificate of Incorporation ▪ Articles of Association ▪ Board Governance Policy ▪ Board Polices ▪ Board and Employee Contact Information ▪ Terms of Reference	Board Effect Via Executive Assistant	
Vision, Mission, Principals and Values of the organization both locally and nationally	CEO	
Strategic and Business Plans	CEO	
Most Recent Annual Report	CEO	
Most Recent Audited Financial Statements	Treasurer & CEO	
Board Calendar	Executive Assistant	
Board Remuneration of Expenses	Executive Assistant	

Roles and Responsibilities		
Review Board, associated committees and their roles	Board Chair	
Discuss expectations and responsibilities for and of new Board members	Board Chair	
Committee Structure and Function	Board Chair	
Communications – Social Media etc.	CEO	
Donor Stewardship - Thank You Calls to Donors	CEO	
Policies and Procedure		
Review Board policies and procedures with new Board members	Board Chair	
Financial Management		
Discuss Budget process; Provide current year's budget	Treasurer &/or CEO	
Transition from Nourish the North to Smart and Caring	Treasurer &/or CEO	
Other Information		
Access to Board / Committee Information via Board Portal (Board Effect)	Executive Assistant	
Tour of facilities and offices	CEO	
Provide brochures and other promotional materials	CEO	
Confidential Agreement and Declaration of Conflict Forms	Executive Assistant	
Outlook I Board Effect – other technology	Executive Assistant	
New Member Comments:		
CEO Signature:		