

HOW TO BUILD AN EFFECTIVE BOARD IN PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE

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Islamic schools in America are aiming for excellence. Excellence can only be achieved if every component of the school aims for excellence. We expect excellence from our teachers and administrators, so we also expect excellence from our board members. Every non-profit executive wants to have an ideal board whose members are deeply committed to the mission of the school, who talk about the school passionately, who bring different areas of expertise to the board, and who are willing to ask for funds for the school. Does such an ideal board exist? Strong, effective boards do not occur automatically; an ideal board must be built with careful planning, diligence, and continuous evaluation. Usually, the Board Development Committee (Governance Committee) is charged with this important task.

A growing trend among nonprofit boards is the establishment of a committee to deal with a range of governance issues. This committee is called Committee on Trustees, Governance Committee, or Board Development Committee.

The purpose of this Committee is to make certain that the board is constantly working on its level of efficiency. For instance, the Committee could decide to replace one person with another person who has different skills more suitable to the growth of the organization. Or, upon observing a reduction in the enthusiasm and participation of the board, the Committee would make some phone calls, book an emergency meeting, or conduct a board self-evaluation. In short, the Committee should be the lifeline of the board and organization. It should regularly ensure that the organization is bringing about results and that the organization is running resourcefully and honestly. The responsibility of board development, education, assessment, and recruitment of new members falls upon the shoulders of the Committee.

The Board Building Cycle, as discussed on the next page, is an overview of the process of building a strong board. Non-profits can use this cycle to reorganize their current board or improve upon their existing board by identifying parts of this cycle that characterize strengths and weaknesses.

Nine Steps of the Board Building Cycle



Step 1: Identify board needs (skills, knowledge, perspective, connections, etc., needed to implement the strategic plan). What do we have? What is missing? Identify sources of board members with the needed characteristics.

Step 2: Cultivate potential board members. Get them interested in your organization and keep them informed of your progress.

Step 3: Recruit prospects. Describe why a prospective member is wanted and needed. Describe expectations and responsibilities of board members, and don't minimize requirements. Invite questions, and elicit their interest and preparedness to serve.

Step 4: Orient new board members to the organization—program, history, bylaws, pressing issues, finances, facilities, organization chart—and to the board—recent minutes, committees, board member responsibilities, lists of board members and key staff members.

Step 5: Activate all board members. Discover their interests and availability. Involve them in committees or task forces. Assign them a board "buddy." Solicit feedback. Hold everyone accountable. Express appreciation for work well done.

Step 6: Educate the board. Provide information concerning your mission area. Promote exploration of issues facing the organization. Don't hide difficulties.

Step 7: Rotate board members. Establish and use term limits. Do not automatically re-elect for an additional term; consider the board's needs and the board member's performance. Explore advisability of resigning with members who are not active. Develop new leadership.

Step 8: Evaluate the board and individual board members. Engage the board in assessing its own performance. Identify ways in which to improve. Encourage individual self-assessment.

Step 9: Celebrate! Recognize victories and progress, even small ones. Appreciate individual contributions to the board, the organization, and the community. Make room for humor and a good laugh.

BOARD DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE JOB DESCRIPTION

Introduction

Boards of nonprofit organizations have customarily used nomination committees to identify and recommend new directors. Often these committees meet just a few times a year, usually before the annual meeting at which new trustees are elected. A growing trend among non-profit boards is the establishment of a committee to deal with range of governance issues. This committee is called “Committee on Trustee” or “Board Development Committee”.

Purpose

The Board Development Committee is responsible for ongoing review and recommendations to enhance the quality and future viability of the Board of Trustees. The Board Development Committee works very closely with the school head and the Board Chair. The Board Development Committee determines the composition of the board—identifying, recruiting, and proposing new trustees. This committee also facilitates the board’s self-assessment; plans for leadership succession; and plans for trustee professional development through orientation, training, and ongoing education. It focuses heavily on five areas.

Responsibilities

1. Board Roles and Responsibilities

- Lead the board in regularly reviewing and updating the board’s statement of its mission, role and areas of responsibility, and the expectations of individual trustees.
- Assist the board in periodically updating and clarifying the primary areas of focus for the board—the board’s agenda for the next year, based on the strategic plan.

2. Board Recruitment

- Lead in assessment of the current and anticipated needs for board composition. The Committee should determine the knowledge, attributes, skills, abilities, influence and access the board will need to consider the issues and topics that will come before the board in the foreseeable future.
- Develop a profile of the board as it should evolve over time.
- Identify potential board candidates, present as possibilities, and explore their interest and availability (establish pool of candidates)
- Make sure that there is sufficient information on each one so that the committee can make educated decisions.
- Interview likely candidates to ascertain their interest and to begin the education process.
- Develop a slate of new trustees, with back-up candidates for each vacancy.
- Ask chosen candidates if they will serve.
- Present a slate of trustees to the board for approval.
- Review and revise board recruitment materials.
- In cooperation with board chair, meet annually with each trustee to assess his/her continuing interest in board membership and the term of service. Work with each trustee to identify the appropriate post (trustee role) s/he might assume on behalf of the school.

3. **Board Training**

- Develop and review “Board Development Plan” for the year.
- Design and oversee a process of board orientation, including information prior to election as a trustee and information needed during the first cycle of board activity for new board members (usually a year)
- Design and implement an ongoing program of board information and education to help board members.

4. **Board Effectiveness & Accountability**

- Lead the periodic assessment of the board’s performance. Facilitate board self-assessment and provide other evaluation tools.
- Propose, as appropriate, changes in board structure, role and responsibilities.
- Provide ongoing counsel to the board chair and other board leaders on steps s/he might take to enhance board effectiveness.
- Regularly review the board’s practices regarding member participation, conflict of interest, confidentiality, etc., and suggest improvements as needed.
- Periodically review and update the board’s bylaws, policy guidelines and practices.

5. **Board Leadership**

- Take the lead in succession planning, taking steps to recruit and prepare for future board leadership and recommend an officer slate to the board for its approval.

Relationship to the Board:

Works closely with the board chair, who serves on the committee ex-officio. Includes the board in the process, especially in the areas of assessment, development of selection criteria, and identification of potential candidates. The full board approves the slate of trustees, officers, and members of the committee on trustees, if that is part of the committee’s charge.

Relationship to the Head:

Works closely with the head, who serves on the committee ex-officio. Seeks advice of the head on all aspects of the committee’s work. Head should be involved in and have a voice in the meetings with potential trustees and new trustee orientation.

Resources:

- Board self-assessment tools
- Nominating grid
- Strategic plan
- Orientation information
- Bylaws – policies
- Diversity goals
- Board manual
- Trustee expectations

This information is adapted from *Board Building Cycle: Nine Steps to Finding, Recruiting, and Engaging Nonprofit Board Members* by Sandra R. Hughes, M. Lakey Berit, and Marla J. Bobowick. Washington, DC: BoardSource, 2000.