

Evaluating The Evaluator

25 key questions for assessing your board's performance

One of the more overlooked responsibilities of a nonprofit board is the requirement to assess its own performance. Nonprofit boards are familiar with their other main responsibilities, such as selecting the chief executive and evaluating their performance on an annual basis, ensuring that the organization has the necessary resources required to carry out its mission, ensuring that effective organizational planning is performed, and recruiting new members to the board.

There are three options for the board to assess its own performance:

1. Have the board chair and chief executive meet with each board member and discuss their thoughts about the strengths as well as the areas of board performance needing approval.

2. Complete a board assessment questionnaire that asks a series of questions on the work of the board with questions asking for either a response of 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest) or from strongly disagree to strongly agree with responses in the middle range as well.

3. Have an outside professional facilitator perform the assessment with a combination of questionnaire and confidential personal interviews asking open-ended questions that measure the board member's engagement with the organization, how fulfilling and meaningful their experience as a board member has been, and recommendations for removing the obstacles and improving

the work of the board.

Though some organizations prefer option #1, I would highly recommend against having the CEO too involved in assessing the work of the board. By having the CEO along with the board chair asking the questions, this option does not always allow the board members to be candid and honest with their responses. This option can also expose the CEO to a potential political firestorm as well.

The vast majority of boards that perform an annual performance assessment utilize a questionnaire format. Questions are asked that call for a numerical response on a wide range of issues dealing with the organization's mission, programs and services, financial resources, fiscal oversight, CEO performance, board and CEO relationships, new board member orientation, board committees, meetings, and other board policies.

A summary is usually prepared after all responses have been obtained and a numerical score is provided indicating areas of strength as well as potential areas of improvement needed. The problem with most, if not all, questionnaires is that they don't allow open-ended questions and rarely ask the most important questions getting to the heart of the matter for improving the board's work.

From my experience, the most effective way to assess the nonprofit board's annual performance is to combine a

questionnaire with a trained board facilitator asking important open-ended questions measuring the level of motivation and engagement of the board members. The key questions that need to be asked include the following:

- How would you describe the board's passion for the mission of the organization?
- How passionate are you about the mission of the organization?
- What is the vision of this organization?
- How do you feel about the organization's current strategic plan?
- What recommendations, if any, would you make to improve the process and plan?
- How would you describe your level of excitement about seeing this vision become a reality?
- What do you like about being on this board?
- How meaningful and fulfilling has been your experience serving on this board?
- How would you describe your level of engagement with this organization?
- How would you describe the board's level of engagement with the organization?
- How effective are the board meetings?
- What are the strengths of the current board?
- What areas of improvement are needed?
- What is the image of the organization in the community?
- What recommendations, if any, do you have for improving the image of the organization in the community?
- How does the board measure the success

of the organization?

- How does the board ensure that the organization provides value to its key stakeholders?
- How would you describe the strengths of the CEO?
- How would you describe the CEO's communication style?
- What recommendations, if any, would you make to improve the CEO's performance?
- How would you describe the board's relationship with the CEO?
- Who has responsibility for fundraising in the organization?
- What is the board's role related to fundraising?
- What recommendations would you make, if any, to improve fundraising for the organization?
- Do you make an annual personal gift to the organization?

To dramatically improve the work of the board, one has to assess the level of engagement and motivation of their board members with the organization. Only through engaging and motivating members of their boards can nonprofits truly achieve a culture of success by integrating board governance, visionary thinking and philanthropy. *NPT*

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