

STRENGTHEN YOUR BOARD'S LEADERSHIP BY INCREASING ITS UNDERSTANDING OF PROGRAMS

Many organizations are committed to improving their board's overall performance but struggle to know where to start. An area that may not immediately come to mind, but could have a sizeable impact on your board, is an understanding of your organization's programs. *Leading with Intent: 2017 National Index of Nonprofit Board Practices* found that a "strong understanding of programs is linked to stronger board engagement, strategy, and external leadership — including fundraising." In fact, chief executives rank "knowledge of organization's programs" as the fourth most important characteristic of board impact on organizational performance.

This resource outlines how a strong understanding of programs can impact board performance and suggests ways in which a board can strengthen its members' knowledge of programs.

AN UNDERSTANDING OF PROGRAMS MATTERS

Strategic thinking, planning, and decision making

The board's role in strategy encompasses strategic thinking and decision making about the organization's future, helping develop and then adopting a strategic plan or framework, and monitoring organizational performance as it relates to previously set goals.

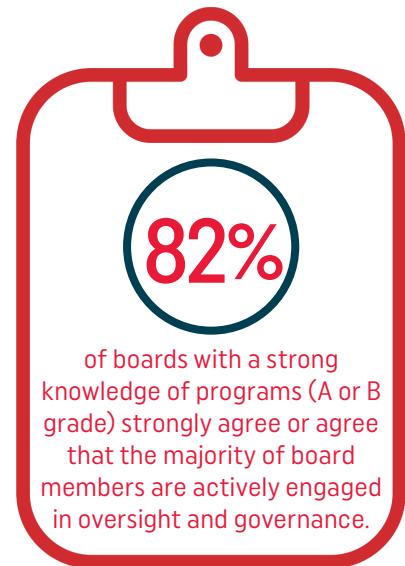
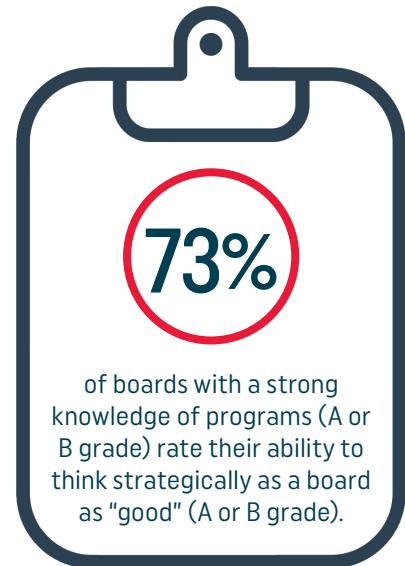
This finding should come as no surprise. Can you imagine making decisions about your organization without knowing what it does, why it matters, and how you are — or are not — having an impact?

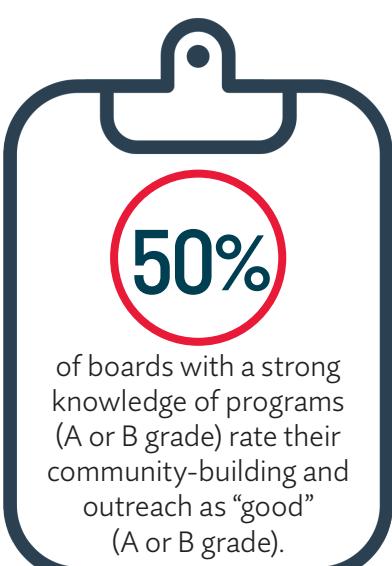
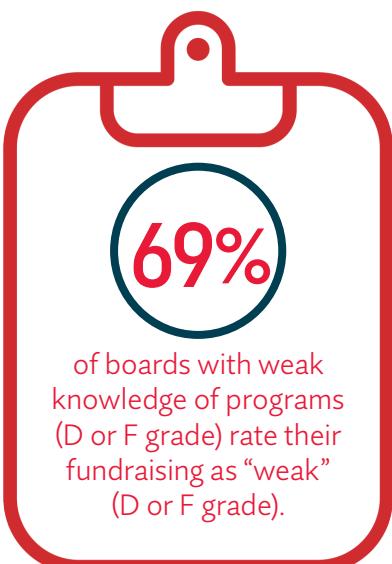
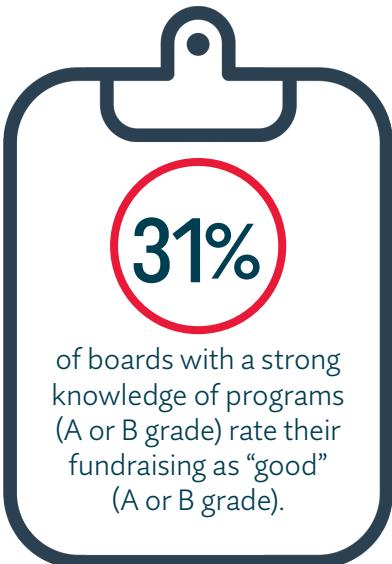
One of a board member's most important roles is to ask insightful questions and question assumptions. Understanding the big picture — the environment in which an organization operates and any challenges or opportunities that have recently arisen and how they relate to your programs — is crucial.

Commitment and engagement

Many nonprofit leaders choose to join a board because they have a connection of some sort to the organization — a specific tie to its mission or a feeling that their skills are uniquely needed. Occasionally, however, a board member's engagement or commitment wanes over time. Continuing to connect board members to an organization's programs is one of the best ways to ensure they remain interested and invested in their work.

A strong knowledge of an organization's programs can also help board members identify where their skills are most useful. Proactively offering to lend financial expertise to a program that is struggling to earn revenue, for example, or volunteering at an upcoming event can increase board members' personal connections to the organization.





Fundraising

Fundraising is among the most challenging aspects of board service and is consistently rated as the lowest area of board performance. One way in which board members can increase their comfort with fundraising is by improving their understanding of their organization’s programs. This knowledge will help them identify contacts within their networks who might connect with their organization’s mission, craft and tell stories about the organization’s work, and determine which programs might benefit from additional resources.

Community building and outreach – external leadership and ambassadorship

Similar to fundraising, [advocacy](#) and external community-building can intimidate some board members. Again, knowledge is essential to increasing board members’ comfort in engaging with their contacts and discussing the organization’s important work. Board members speaking about their passion for an organization’s mission and its work in the community is one of the most effective advocacy techniques.

Another aspect of advocacy involves understanding external factors, such as public policy decisions or the viewpoints of newly elected officials, and how they can impact an organization’s programs. A strong understanding of specific programs allows board members to speak knowledgeably to key officials or individuals within government who should be kept informed about the organization’s work.

HOW TO DEVELOP A STRONG UNDERSTANDING OF PROGRAMS

Recruitment and orientation

Educating board members about an organization’s programs should begin as early as possible — even before they have formally joined the board. During the recruitment process, the board chair (or governance committee chair) and chief executive should discuss the organization’s current programs and how they fit in with the organization’s mission with all potential board members. Ensure that any candidates moved forward appear interested in learning more.

Once board members have been elected and officially join the board, their orientation should include materials or presentations that explain the organization and its work. In addition to written resources, consider face-to-face discussions of current programs with key staff as part of the board orientation curriculum.

One way in which board members can connect or reconnect to the organization’s work is through hands-on volunteering. This kind of experience can often provide valuable insight that prepared materials, or even a staff presentation, cannot provide. Seeing the organization’s mission in action can deepen a board member’s connection to and understanding of the organization’s impact.

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Board meetings

Board meeting materials When planning for upcoming board meetings, the chief executive and board chair should pay special attention to the materials provided to board members. The goal is to provide context and background to deepen board members' knowledge of programs, initiatives, and financials. Board meeting materials should not force board members to slog through irrelevant information or provide unnecessary details.

Providing the right level and scope of information allows board members to engage in high-level, big-picture thinking and leave the details of daily execution to the organization's staff. Engaging in more strategic conversations and deliberation during board meetings results in more effective decision making and a greater impact on organizational success.

Mission moments Many boards begin their meetings with a "mission moment" as a way to demonstrate the organization's impact. Mission moments can take a variety of forms. Often, the chief executive or board chair will share a recent experience that speaks to the impact the organization has had on the community served.

Alternatively, if the board is interested in a longer, potentially more impactful mission moment, it could invite a member of the community served to attend a board meeting and speak to his or her involvement with the organization. Providing the opportunity to speak directly to an organization's constituent strengthens board members' connection to the mission and provides them with direct information about the organization's work.

Ongoing education and reflection

Board members should never assume, either due to their long tenure on the board or unique connection to the organization, that they no longer need to educate themselves about organizational programs. Because board members are not involved in the day-to-day execution of programs, it is impossible to stay up to date without regular opportunities for education.

In addition to strengthening their knowledge about the organization's work, board members should take time on a regular basis to reflect on the following questions: How have organizational programs evolved, and why? How do these programs relate to and support the organization's mission? What is the board's role in monitoring and evaluating these programs?

Board Self-Assessment Boards that assess their performance regularly perform better on their core responsibilities. Assessment provides an opportunity for board members to identify areas in which the board is succeeding as well as any potential challenges that may need to be addressed, such as program oversight.

Assessment can also increase individual engagement by asking board members to reflect on their contributions and the role of the board as a whole. Discussing the results of an assessment with the full board and creating an action plan moving forward can help board members hold themselves accountable and focus on making positive changes.

HELPFUL RESOURCES

