

# AN UPDATED ROLE FOR THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS

by  
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No single asset is more critical to the success of an organization than its board of directors. A board of directors that understands and agrees on its role, and shares a vision of the future, can be exceedingly powerful and effective. From the perspective of an association executive, working with a board that understands and agrees on its role is the difference between a job and a job you love.

What is the role of the board? There is no “one” answer to that question for several important reasons. For one, the needs of organizations vary, and so may the role of the board. Also, leaders may disagree philosophically on the role of the board. Unfortunately, measurement of board performance is subjective, so we cannot really know.

Since the specific role of a board does not lend itself to a one-size-fits-all approach, it is important to identify the ideals that underlie the board’s role in any given organization. A traditional model, entitled “Ten Basic Responsibilities of Nonprofit Boards,” by Richard T. Ingram (published by the National Center for Nonprofit Boards, Suite 510, 2000 L Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036-4907, [ncnb@ncnb.org](mailto:ncnb@ncnb.org)), suggests the following functions:

## Traditional Board Functions

1. Determine the Organization’s Mission and Purpose
2. Select the Chief Executive
3. Support the Chief Executive and Assess Their Performance
4. Ensure Effective Organizational Planning
5. Ensure Adequate Resources
6. Manage Resources Effectively
7. Determine, Monitor and Strengthen the Organization’s Programs and Services
8. Enhance the Organization’s Public Standing
9. Ensure Legal and Ethical Integrity and Maintain Accountability
10. Recruit and Orient New Board Members and Assess Board Performance

While this is an excellent model, I believe it places too little emphasis on the highest level of board function (instilling vision), and too much focus on operational activities (for example, manage resources effectively, and determine, monitor and strengthen programs and services). My suggested model for the role of a nonprofit board is as follows:

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### **A New Role for the Board**

1. Establish the Organization's Mission and Vision
2. Select, Support and Assess the Performance of the Chief Executive
3. Establish Strategic Goals and Objectives (entailing environmental scanning and assessment)
4. Establish Appropriate Organizational Policies
5. Approve Budget and Major Program Proposals
6. Recruit and Nurture Future Leaders
7. Promote the Organization, Its Programs and Its Ideals to Members and the Community

These functions focus the board on its highest tasks: to focus on the values and ideology of the organization, on policy, and on the future, rather than operational and administrative matters. Don't get me wrong: operational matters are important and must be handled well. But most boards are easily caught up in the detail, cannot resist the lure of hands-on involvement, and lose sight of the bigger picture. Operational activities can and should be delegated with much more frequency (even if only to a committee of the board). The higher functions cannot be delegated, and a board could not possibly spend too much time on them.

The role of the board should be reviewed by the board periodically, perhaps as part of an annual orientation or training meeting. Better still, an agreement of the board concerning its role is advisable.

Every board is different. What works with one board might be ill-timed, or otherwise inappropriate for another board. If you have questions about these ideas or improving your board, please do not hesitate to call. We look forward to hearing from you.

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