

Forming the Nonprofit's First Board

The first challenge for a founder of a new nonprofit organization is to build a board.

This entails recruiting committed and resourceful volunteer board members, organizing the first board meeting, and, most importantly, guiding the new board on its **roles and responsibilities**, which includes fine-tuning the **mission**, setting the guidelines for effective governance, and helping develop strategies. This is also the point where you really need to see if **partnering with another organization** makes more sense than starting your own organization. This work will establish a sense of ownership for all involved and reduce the burden on the founder.

Immediate demands on the first board

The start-up phase serves as an initiation for the board. If there is no staff yet, which is often the case, the board also must serve in that capacity. All board members must be willing and able to commit the time needed to set up the organization. For example, if the nonprofit exists only in theory, the board immediately needs to **apply for tax-exempt status** and possibly incorporate the organization. At the first board meeting, there will be assignments to go round for everyone! Often the board continues to be a working board for some time. When the organization is settled and financially stable enough **to hire**

staff, the board can focus its efforts on its primary task — serving as the organization's governing and oversight body.

What should the first board look like?

It is important for the founding board to have the skills and expertise needed to start an organization. Find people who understand your mission area or field and are familiar with your constituents and their needs. If you are dependent on outside funding, involve someone who can assist in developing a fundraising plan. You need someone who is technologically savvy as well. Bring in innovative people who have new ideas. And keep group dynamics in mind: Is this a group of people who can work as a team?

Start with a small but committed group. If you have a working board, decide **what the ideal size is** to get the initial work done. If you can hire staff, define your own role either as a board member or as part of the management team.

Where to find board members

Board recruitment can be difficult. Where can you find individuals who are interested in the mission of the organization, have time to give, have the needed skills and expertise, and can provide leadership for the organization? Many people look to the following for referrals or actual candidates:

- Circle of friends and neighbors
- Professional and business contacts
- Other nonprofits
- Professional associations
- Major corporations and their community outreach programs
- Local businesses
- Local nonprofit support organizations, United Way chapters, or community foundations
- News or printed media featuring community leaders

The first board meeting

For some boards, the first board meeting is the first official opportunity for the members to meet each other. For other boards, there may have been plenty of prior communication. No matter what, this meeting starts the formal activity of the board as a legal entity. During the first meeting, the board must

- fix the name and the legal address for the organization to be included in its legal documents
- elect officers
- authorize new officers to make business decisions for the organization (open bank accounts, sign checks, sign a lease)
- adopt a set of **bylaws** (if they already have been drafted) or start creating this document
- assign duties for everyone

The next step

A group is as efficient in accomplishing its mission as its guidelines are explicit. Create a governance committee that is constantly involved in renewing the board and educating it. This committee may need to do some research and educate itself before it can guide the rest of the team. Make sure that each board member understands his or her responsibilities. Implement **term limits** to allow your board to refresh itself and bring in new ideas on a regular basis. Orient new board members. **Create other committees** or task forces to engage your board members individually. Finally, stress that boards act only as a collective entity – decision making is a group function.

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*Resource: **The Board Building Cycle: Finding, Engaging, and Strengthening Nonprofit Board Members***