# 5 Strategies Programs Can Follow to Boost Board Performance

A board of trustees is charged with governing a nonprofit organization. A board should establish a program's mission, vision, and direction and provide leadership that makes it possible for program staff and volunteers to focus on the day-to-day tasks of carrying out the mission.

The National Responsible Fatherhood Capacity Building Initiative suggests several actions for developing a strong board that can guide a program in meeting its goals and share the work of making a difference in the lives of fathers, children, and families.
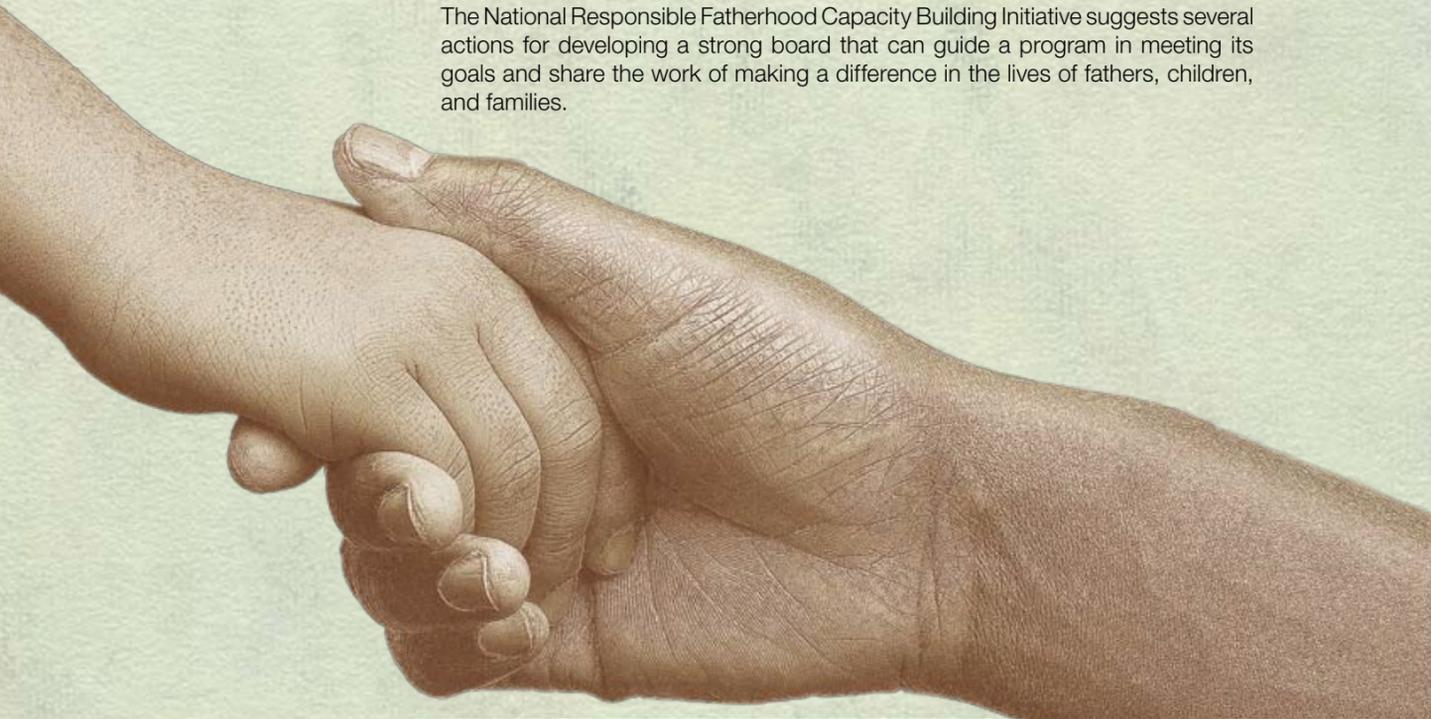
Building Capacity for Programs that Promote Responsible Fatherhood…

Leadership Development

Organizational Improvement

Program Enhancement

Community Engagement

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Administration for Children and Families
Office of Family Assistance

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5 Ways to Form an Effective Board

NATIONAL RESPONSIBLE FATHERHOOD
CAPACITY BUILDING
INITIATIVE

1 Conduct a Board Check-up

If your program already has a board of directors, regular evaluation can identify the board's strengths and determine gaps in expertise or performance. Evaluation can be conducted annually to determine the board's overall effectiveness throughout the year, quickly at the end of each board meeting, or through self-evaluation.

Start by reviewing the program's current goals to ensure they align with recent board accomplishments. Administer a survey or use a checklist to measure how well the board functions. Because boards usually are designed to govern, not manage, a program, determine whether the board appropriately has made decisions that affect overall program direction or has intervened in the daily work of staff. Verify that the board meets regularly, runs meetings productively, and follows established guidelines for collaborating as a group. Also assess how successful the board has been in raising funds and promoting the program to external audiences.

Individual board members also should be evaluated periodically. Performance measures might include attending a certain percentage of board meetings, chairing or serving on a committee, attending program-sponsored events, securing a certain number of new donors, making a personal or business contribution to the program's operating needs, or making presentations to community groups, civic associations, and foundations, or one-on-one visits to request financial contributions. Be honest in the evaluations, and do not allow poorly performing board members to continue year after year, adding little value to the program.

2 Orient New Board Members

At least once a year, conduct an orientation and schedule all members—new and veteran—to participate. Structure the agenda to incorporate team-building activities and interactive information sharing. A buddy system that pairs new board members with veteran members also can be helpful for familiarizing new members with their duties.

Give new board members all the information they need to perform the job. Develop a welcome packet that features a brief history of the program, as well as its mission, vision, values, and strategic goals. The packet should contain materials that outline how the program fulfills its mission, scope of services, management structure, and staff and volunteer roles. Board members should understand the difference between their individual and collective roles and responsibilities and those of program staff. Prepare an overview of existing and planned board committees and recruit new members to serve. Also provide a calendar of board meetings and events board members are expected to attend in the coming year.

3 Keep Searching

One of the key responsibilities of a board is to ensure its own continuation and development. Therefore, the current board must take an active role in recruiting new members. Building a strong board is not a once-a-year activity—be on the lookout continuously for potential board members.

Do not limit your search by assuming that certain people would not be interested in working with your program. Be creative in identifying potential board members. Check the local newspaper to learn who the newsmakers are in your area and what talents they have. Also, many people volunteer to fulfill personal interests. For example, the teacher who was invited to join the board with an eye toward expanding training really might want an opportunity to become involved in planning the program's special events.

An informal chat over lunch could help you gauge a person's interest in serving on the board before a formal invitation is offered. Provide potential board members with a program overview, a detailed description of the board position, and an application. With the permission of current board members, give candidates their contact information, encouraging them to get in touch and ask questions. Also invite candidates to meet with the board chair and the program's top management, or ask them to attend a board meeting for a first-hand preview.

4 Mix Well

Effective boards are composed of individuals with a broad array of knowledge, expertise, experience, and interests. Shape a board that possesses a mix of education, skills, information, and access to important networks such as donors. The board also should represent the communities you serve with respect to age, ethnicity, and other important demographics. Additionally, board members should have personal or professional influence among key audiences that can support the program.

As your program grows, you will need board members with specific knowledge and experience, for example, in human resources, finance, or marketing. A board can become stagnant if every member brings the same perspective to an issue or decision. Ask current board members to list their strengths and the complementary characteristics and capabilities new members should have. Create a grid showing the qualities you seek in new board members. Be sure the grid reflects the program's short- and long-term goals. Refer to the grid and record successful matches as your search proceeds.

If the board has a significant number of members, consider establishing committees that work on specific tasks outside the full board meetings. Many nonprofit organizations have personnel, finance, communications and marketing, nominating, and other committees. Even in organizations that expect all board members to raise funds, many boards have a fundraising committee to coordinate these activities.

5 Sustain Support

Ongoing support during their term helps board members complete their work more effectively. Their continuous learning and improvement are necessary for a program to advance. To help the program evolve, board members must enhance existing skills and master new ones, such as resolving conflict to achieve results. The board should formulate goals and priorities that address the challenges the program faces. Use this list as a starting point for possible training topics. For example, if the board decides to pursue Federal funding for the first time, board members and program staff will need training or technical assistance on managing federally funded projects.

Training and development can happen through workshops, guest speakers, a presentation by one of the board members, or participation in seminars and conferences sponsored by other organizations. Try to integrate learning into every board meeting and program event that board members attend.