



Stages of Board Development¹

Boards tend to develop in stages that follow the growth and evolution of the organizations of which they are a part. Therefore, the needs of the organization at any particular point in its development will change. This will change the focus of the work of the board and, in turn, the skills that will need to exist among the board's members. These changes can also mean shifts in the nature of board-staff relationships and changes in the balance of power and authority of the board and staff. Finally, board and staff members can expect to see particular kinds of dynamics and/or issues depending of the stage of development and specific actions can be taken both to strengthen the work of the board at any point and to help a board from one stage to another in order to keep up with the organization.

Typically most of what is written about Boards describes appropriate roles and responsibilities of boards as if Boards are static and mature, rather than providing an understanding that boards need to have different foci at different times in the organization's developmental cycle.

Overall comments

1. Stages are not "pure". They may have some characteristics of one stage and some of another, but the overall situation generally indicates one stage more than another.
2. The stage of an organization's development is not necessarily consistent with the age of the org; an organization, despite its age, may not progress to the stage of maturity and/or a crisis may occur which sends an org. back to an earlier stage of development.
3. An organization can get stuck in any stage.
4. An organization can move backward to earlier stages.

¹This model has been informed by Michael Burns' articles on board development published in the New England Non-Profit quarterly, Summer and Fall, 1997

Stage 1: Start up

Organizational focus/needs

- starting up
- focus on operations (usually core program)
- few resources
- minimal fundraising—only to insure survival

Board focus

- Board work differs depending on how organization is founded either by A) people who are volunteers on the board OR B) people who are the first staff. In either case, there may be significant board-staff overlap in membership
 - A. Begun by volunteers who become a board
 - a. Board is composed of founders (may be customers and providers)
 - b. Board members carry strong passion for organization's mission
 - c. If there is staff at all, the board and staff may have significant overlap
 - d. Board focus is deeply on operations – doing the work to keep the organization going (usually program work itself but, may also do non-program work like keeping the books, fulfilling legal needs, etc.)
 - e. Board members often experience time stress
 - B. Begun by people who are staff, boards often exist more in name than in terms of exercising real authority
 - a. Board members often selected for connections to the program work, connections which will allow interface with related organizations, or personal connections to senior staff member
 - b. Focus of the Board's work is operations, but mostly done on a one-to-one basis with a staff member (more likely to do non-program work, but cover administrative needs)
 - C. In either case: board does little planning (needs are obvious; don't have the time to it—if they stopped operations work to do planning, organization would not survive)
 - a. Make policy and do fund-raising only on an “as-needed” basis
 - b. Any evaluation focuses on the present

Desired qualities of board members in this stage

- A. vision and commitment to mission
- B. skills, knowledge or experience with developing or managing programs
- C. other specific skills the organization may need but may not be able to pay for (e.g., financial skills, grant writing, legal, etc.)
- D. endurance for long meetings that address intricate operational details but may not result in a decision
- E. a working experience and knowledge of decision-making processes
- F. willingness to commit time and energy

Board challenges in this stage

- A. defining roles, responsibilities and structures that meet the current needs of the organization
- B. maintaining board members' interests and passion for the mission (situation B)
- C. preventing board member burn-out (situation A)
- D. addressing longer term needs of the organization

Suggestions for how to manage the board through the start-up stage

- A. separate meetings to deal with operations and infrastructure issues
- B. planned retreat (once per year) to do some short term planning (next year or two)
- C. divide and assign responsibilities related to board issues (recruitment/ nomination, orientation, and basic maintenance of board members, by-laws and other governance-related issues)

Stage 2: Early Growth

Organizational focus/needs

- A. The organization is growing
- B. There is an increasing need for staff to do the work
- C. There is a major difference in the need for a better infrastructure
- D. Otherwise, needs are not essentially different from its needs in start-up period

Board focus

- A. active role in beginning to looking beyond day-to-day needs (may mark beginning of this stage)
- B. continues to focus on operations but accept notion that it is okay to have help
- C. has *some* concern about governance
- D. board may begin to see a need for more formal systems
- E. board may set up committee to think about operations (e.g., hire staff, etc.)

Desired qualities of board members

- A. people with passion for mission and work of org
- B. people willing to give up some of their hands-on involvement in operations (founders may leave at this stage: "my work is done")
- C. people willing to take on more of the governance responsibilities
- D. ability to raise money
- E. ability to deliver other needed resources beyond connection and legitimacy with consumers (e.g., finance skills, political connections, etc.)

Board challenges in this stage

- A. recognized need for infrastructure changes but reluctance to make large changes (particularly if the organization is experiencing program successes)
 - a. building trust among board members
 - b. recommendations of subcommittees may be questioned since members are used to being deeply involved in everything
- B. expectations for staff that exceed capacity:
 - a. determining a realistic work load for paid staff
 - b. not giving up all operations work
- C. determining which operations work to give up and then letting go: giving up some involvement in day-to-day operations as more staff are hired to fulfill particular roles
- D. often first staff is a founder; leads to tensions around that person's role and potential board-staff role tensions
- E. tensions between old (founding) and newer members re: time, commitment, critical view of the organization.

Suggestions for managing the board through this stage

- A. define work within the limits of the both the staff and board—don't exceed their capacity:
 - a. set realistic objectives for both board and staff: taking on too much is a hold over from the start up stage
 - b. minimize number of committees
- B. think intentionally about new board members:
 - a. possibly set up nominating committee to recruit desirable new members who can help organization and board move to next stage of development
 - b. orient new members to history of organization and awareness/appreciation of hard work of "older" board members
 - c. orient new members re role expectations as board members
 - d. create opportunities for board members to get to know one another
- C. build strong relationship between board chair and senior staff
- D. create an executive committee to be the de facto group with power to act when there is a problem
- E. celebrate successes to help board feel appreciated

Stage 3: Growth and Expansion

Organizational focus/needs

- A. Organization continues to grow but experiences ups and downs
- B. Addition of programs and staff
- C. Programs often functioning relatively independently of one another
- D. Need to restructure and rethink skills needed to successfully fill various organizational roles
- E. Tensions about organization's identity and growth strategies
- F. Staff will management skills needed in addition to program staff/ but managers often still involved in program
- G. Stronger infrastructure needed
- H. More external interface needed
- I. Staff takes on and provides the bulk of service and support

Board focus

- A. Still providing some services, but more administration than program
- B. Greater % of attention focused on addressing governance issues, fundraising, financial oversight, evaluation & planning
- C. Board treasurer oversees organizational finances and work of bookkeeper but is not the bookkeeper

Desired qualities of board members

- A. Members with more skills related to governance, planning and fundraising
- B. Members with skills and knowledge related to management
- C. Balance on board with those representing client segments, those with planning, management and development skills and those with program and context familiarity

Board challenges in this stage

- A. Struggles with staff about the appropriate role of each in operations and governance
- B. Struggles over power and authority between board and staff:
 - a. which group will lead,
 - b. which group has what level of authority and
 - c. which has what responsibilities (e.g., staff struggles over when and where to involve board in operations issues, how much detailed information to provide board, which decisions need board approval; board struggles over involvement in operations, trusting staff and time spent on planning and policy)
- C. Staff tends to be more of the driving force during this stage
- D. Struggles may lead to the loss of dedicated and capable board and staff
- E. Tensions over board roles vs staff or consultant roles re fundraising and development
- F. Tensions among board members due to growing member diversity
- G. Episodes of chaos, confusion, absenteeism, extremism common2

Suggestions for managing the board through this stage

- A. Actively delineate roles, responsibility and authority of staff and board
- B. Strong orientation of new members to history, development and mission of the organization
- C. Activities to connect board members to one another; appreciation for each other's experience, skills and knowledge
- D. Clarify what information is to come to the board and what kinds of decisions board does and does not need to approve
- E. Focus board on policy level decisions, planning, etc
- F. Staff and board engagement in discussions about the organization's identity, how programs fit together, and other meaningful mission-related discussions etc.
- G. Development of board committees with specific goals/ tasks to be accomplished
- H. Encourage and support senior staff in efforts to internally restructure the organization and to determine the best staffing pattern
- I. Work with staff to strengthen organizational infrastructure
- J. Give board members specific areas of responsibility and encourage them to develop an annual work plan
- K. Keep board members informed about program work

Stage 4: Mature Organization

Organizational focus/needs

- A. Organization is established and reasonably stable
- B. Daily operations run smoothly
- C. Organizational structure links programs and services together
- D. Operational needs are handled by staff and/or consultants
- E. Need to look to future to ensure long term stability
- F. Re-evaluation of direction and strategies
- G. Focus is on improvement and managed growth

Board focus

- A. staff and board have formally established roles and responsibilities
 - B. staff and board hold each other accountable for their respective and agreed upon roles
 - C. Board not involved in operations except role as general oversight, evaluation of executive director and fiduciary responsibilities
- Focus is on planning, oversight, evaluation

Desired qualities of board member

- A. Skills related to management, planning, evaluation, fundraising, and other board activities
- B. Connections to community served, to interface organizations and to potential funders

Board challenges in this stage

- A. Keeping connected to the mission of the organization
- B. Feeling useful
- C. Complacency: false sense of contentment which may lead to failure re critical oversight
- D. Managing unanticipated crises
- E. Keeping attuned to environmental changes (funding, politics, changing demographics, economy, etc.) and responding quickly

Suggestions for managing the board through this stage

- A. Establish a regular planning process (check ups annually with more complete planning process every 3-5 years)
- B. Establish a systematic process for thorough review of organization's performance, finances and senior management performance
- C. Continue thorough board orientation including history, mission, successes, and introduction to specific programs
- D. Provide new board members with specific expectations related to their board participation
- E. Fewer full board members, but board involvement in committee work in between full meetings