



Board Training Isn't Optional: Why Strong Organizations Invest in Stronger Boards

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Board Training | Board Development | Governance Training | Board Retreats | Leadership Development

A board can bring together accomplished, passionate people and still struggle to function as a team. Individual expertise does not automatically create effective governance. Board members often arrive with different leadership styles, expectations, priorities, communication habits, and interpretations of their role. Without intentional board training and development, those differences can turn into unclear responsibilities, unproductive meetings, strained relationships, inconsistent decisions, and tension between the board and executive leadership.

The Board Sets the Tone From the Top

A board is not simply a group of people who attend meetings and approve motions. Particularly in nonprofit organizations, board members carry fiduciary and governance responsibilities that influence strategy, financial oversight, executive accountability, organizational sustainability, community relationships, and mission impact. The National Council of Nonprofits emphasizes that boards are responsible for steering organizations toward a sustainable future through sound governance and financial management.¹ When a board lacks clarity or alignment, the effects can travel throughout the entire organization.

The Problem May Not Be the People - It May Be the Lack of Alignment

When boards struggle, organizations sometimes conclude that they have the wrong people in the seats. Sometimes that is true. But an equally important question is: **Have we ever trained these individuals to operate together as a board?** Many successful professionals understand leadership in their own fields but have never received formal governance education. New board members may need intentional orientation on fiduciary duties, bylaws, financial oversight, conflicts of interest, committees, executive oversight, and the distinction between governance and operations.²

A Board Binder Is Not Board Development

BoardSource reports that **69% of organizations use written resources to educate board members**, while more interactive education approaches such as training, seminars, and webinars are less common.³ Policies, bylaws, financial statements, and strategic plans are essential, but handing someone a binder is not the same as preparing them to govern. Board members need opportunities to ask questions, practice difficult conversations, understand expectations, examine real scenarios, and agree on how they will work together.

Strong Board Training Gets Everyone Operating From the Same Playbook

Imagine twelve board members entering a meeting with twelve different definitions of their job. One believes the board should oversee daily operations. Another believes board members should never challenge the CEO. Someone else thinks fundraising belongs only to staff. Two members rarely speak, while three dominate every discussion. The organization may not have twelve bad board members. **It may have twelve people operating from twelve different playbooks.** Board training creates the opportunity to establish one shared framework for governance, communication, decision-making, accountability, boundaries, and organizational priorities.

The Research Supports Intentional Board Development

BoardSource's *Leading with Intent* research found that executives whose boards had completed a self-assessment within the previous two years rated their boards more highly across every measured area of board performance than executives whose boards had never assessed themselves.⁴ Recently assessed boards averaged **3.18 out of 4 for financial oversight**, compared with **2.68** for boards that had never assessed themselves. For strategic thinking, the comparison was **2.50 versus 2.05**; for monitoring impact against strategic goals, it was **2.36 versus 1.81**.⁴ The message is important: effective boards do not simply meet - they intentionally evaluate, learn, and improve.

Boards Must Understand the Communities They Serve

Board effectiveness also depends on whether the people around the table understand and can build trust with the communities and stakeholders affected by their decisions. BoardSource reports that **49% of chief executives said they did not have the right board members to establish trust with the communities they serve**, while only **32% of boards place a high priority on knowledge of the community served when recruiting board members**.⁵ Board development should therefore include conversations about community awareness, stakeholder perspectives, representation, trust, and mission impact.

Board Training Can Prevent the Boardroom From Becoming the Problem

Warning signs often appear long before anyone calls them a board problem. Meetings run too long. The same disagreements repeat. Board members leave with different interpretations of what was decided. Committees stall. Members begin directing staff. The CEO spends excessive time managing board personalities. Difficult conversations are avoided until frustration becomes conflict. Structured board training creates a professionally facilitated space to address those issues before they damage the organization.

The Questions Strong Boards Are Willing to Ask

What is our responsibility as a board - and what is not? Where does governance end and management begin? What does the CEO or Executive Director need from us? What do we need from executive leadership? How will we handle disagreement? How will we make decisions? How will we hold one another accountable? Which behaviors are strengthening this board, and which are hurting it? What does success look like for us collectively? These are not signs of dysfunction. They are the kinds of questions that create clarity, trust, and mature

governance.

What Effective Board Training Should Include

Board training should be customized around the organization rather than delivered as a generic lecture. Depending on the board's needs, development may include **Board roles and fiduciary responsibilities; governance versus operations; board and CEO/Executive Director relationships; strategic thinking and decision-making; financial oversight; communication and difficult conversations; conflict resolution; emotional intelligence; board culture, trust and accountability; committee effectiveness; executive presence; navigating organizational change; succession planning; community and stakeholder awareness; and building an engaged, high-performing board.** The goal is not to make everyone think alike. **Strong boards need different perspectives.** The goal is to teach people how to bring those perspectives together productively.

Sometimes the Best Board Work Happens Away From the Board Table

Traditional board meetings are designed to conduct business. They are not always the best setting for rebuilding trust, examining board culture, clarifying expectations, or developing a shared vision. A facilitated **board retreat or half-day board development session** can create space to step away from motions, reports, and deadlines and focus on how the board actually functions. BoardSource notes that self-assessment can help clarify board and staff expectations, identify differing perceptions, strengthen teamwork, and establish shared objectives.⁶

How Still Standing in Heels Consulting Supports Boards

At **Still Standing in Heels Consulting**, we help boards move beyond simply occupying seats around the same table. Our customized board training, board retreats, governance training, leadership development, strategic alignment, communication training, conflict resolution, and facilitated development sessions are built around the organization's actual challenges and goals.

We begin by listening. We look at the board's structure, leadership dynamics, organizational priorities, communication patterns, areas of confusion, and the outcomes leadership wants to achieve. From there, we design practical sessions that help board members understand their roles, strengthen relationships, navigate disagreement, communicate with greater confidence, and make decisions with the organization's mission and long-term health in mind.

**Board training is not an admission that your board is failing.
It is an investment in making sure your board is equipped to succeed.**

**The strongest organizations do not simply have talented board members.
They have talented board members who know how to lead together.**

**Still Standing in Heels Consulting
Empowered People • Stronger Leaders • Limitless Impact**

Sources & Research

1. National Council of Nonprofits, Governance & Leadership - guidance on nonprofit board governance and financial oversight.
2. National Council of Nonprofits, Board Orientation - guidance on educating new board members about responsibilities, policies, finances, committees, and executive oversight.
3. BoardSource, Nonprofit Board Education - board education practices, including the reported use of written resources.
4. BoardSource, *Leading with Intent* (2021) - board self-assessment and board performance findings cited in this article.
5. BoardSource, Nonprofit Sector Research - findings regarding board composition, community knowledge, and trust.
6. BoardSource, Assessing Performance - guidance on board self-assessment and board development.

Research links:

councilofnonprofits.org • boardsource.org • leadingwithintent.org