

How to Ensure Effective Board Training

Board members volunteer their time, talent, and treasure for the sake of your ministry. They are often well-intentioned, but they are not always well-equipped.

Fortunately, there are ways you can help your board members become more effective in their roles and therefore better at providing both oversight and insight for your church.

The role of a board member comes with significant responsibilities. Board members must exercise the duty of care and the duty of loyalty, meaning they must act in the best interests of the organization and set aside any personal opinions or agendas. They are held to the standard of doing what a reasonable person would do in the same situation.

At the same time, board members may wear several “hats” within the church. They might put on the volunteer “hat,” for example, when they lead a small group or help with the parking ministry. They may wear the parent “hat” when considering the impact of a ministry decision on their children in the nursery or the high school youth group. The donor “hat” is worn when they determine how they will tithe and what additional ministries or church needs they will support.

However, it is imperative that board members not put on the wrong “hat” when they act on behalf of the church, and that their role as board members is clear to them and to those with whom they speak. When wearing a board “hat,” someone speaks as a voice of the whole board and acts only as directed by the board.

Training Your Board

Churches have opportunities to improve the skill set of board members beginning with the start of their tenure and continuing throughout their term. An intentional focus on board development will yield significant results: not only will it be helpful to the ministry, but it will invest in those individuals and make the board an attractive place to serve.

Starting Off Right

When new members join the governing board or a committee, make sure they have the information necessary to start well. Provide them with organizational documents, such as bylaws and the constitution, as well as meeting minutes from the last couple of years. In this way, they can better understand the inner workings of the ministry. They may have been involved or participated in the church for a long time, but the average churchgoer doesn't typically understand the church's corporate activity or the information that was considered before decisions were made.

New members need to understand the board's type of governance. Does it follow a policy governance model or is it more of a decision-making or operational board? Help individuals know what that means for them specifically and what their roles are. They should also be made aware of the overall organizational chart of the ministry, their primary contact for questions, and information about various committees and terms of service.

Keeping Up the Momentum

Ongoing training should be considered as part of each agenda or at least at regular intervals (e.g., quarterly). The topics can vary, but they should eventually cover all areas of key oversight. Encourage ministry leaders to bring information regarding their involvement in different programs and the effect of those programs.

Be sure there is specific training provided for committees such as finance and personnel. Information can change rapidly in these areas, and the effect can be significant; you can't risk being out-of-date. A broader perspective with updates should be provided to the overall board, so that they are aware of the risks and have the necessary knowledge to make decisions.

Potential topics for board member training include:

- Risk management
- Understanding financial statements
- Human resource compliance
- Housing allowance and tax matters
- Internal control structure
- How to build reserves
- Budgeting for ministry
- Legal exposure

Bringing in Outsiders

An outside perspective for some of the training may be beneficial. Qualified individuals in your church can provide great context and invaluable history, and sometimes it's appropriate to tap into the expertise of a specialist, whether that specialist is an attorney, HR consultant, or CPA. A specialist could also be a facility expert, a banker, or someone from within the denomination. Any outside resource, though, must understand what you are seeking to accomplish, and they must be well-versed in how ministries operate. As there are many unique areas in a church, the trainer must clearly understand them.

Board training needs to be a joint effort between the board and leadership. Colossians 3:23 reminds us that whatever we do should be done with excellence, and serving as a board member (along with assisting those who do) should be no exception. Any training plan you create will certainly be adjusted over time, but the important first step is to start with an idea of what constitutes effective training and how it can be accomplished.

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