

ADVANCE YOUR CAREER THROUGH NONPROFIT BOARD SERVICE



JOHN M. FULWIDER, PH.D.

The Merge Your Missions Series

Advance Your Career through Nonprofit Board Service

John M. Fulwider, Ph.D.

This book is for sale at <http://leanpub.com/advanceyourcareerthroughnonprofitboardservice>

This version was published on 2015-03-05

ISBN 978-0692305331



This is a [Leanpub](#) book. Leanpub empowers authors and publishers with the Lean Publishing process. [Lean Publishing](#) is the act of publishing an in-progress ebook using lightweight tools and many iterations to get reader feedback, pivot until you have the right book and build traction once you do.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License](#)

Also By John M. Fulwider, Ph.D.

The Nonprofit Book of Awesome

Better Together

Better Together: The Companion Workbook

For Jami, Lillian, and Lucille

Contents

Acknowledgments	i
Copyright Notice	ii
1. Introduction	1
Aim of the Book	2
Quick Overview of the Contents	2
I Advance Your Career through Nonprofit Board Service	5
2. It's About the Mission	6
Mission Impact Defined	6
All Kinds of Ways to Change the World	6
Serve for the Right Reasons	8
Don't Overcommit	8
Worksheet: It's About the Mission	9
3. It's About You	10
Develop Your Leadership Strengths	10
Benefits for Your Career	12
You Can Do It Now	12
Worksheet: It's About You	14
4. Conclusion: Advance Your Career through Nonprofit Board Service	16
Further Reading	17
5. Action Plan: Advance Your Career through Nonprofit Board Service	18
II Understanding Nonprofit Board Leadership	19
6. Ten Responsibilities and Privileges	20
Three Summary Responsibilities	20
Committee Work to Fulfill the Ten Responsibilities	26
How the Ten Responsibilities Lead to Mission Impact	27

CONTENTS

What to Expect from Board Service	29
Worksheet: Ten Responsibilities and Privileges	31
7. Finding the Right Board	33
Worksheet: Finding the Right Board	35
8. Conclusion: Understanding Nonprofit Board Leadership	39
Further Reading	40
9. Action Plan: Understanding Nonprofit Board Leadership	42
 III Leading with Strengths on a Nonprofit Board	43
10. Why Strengths Matter for Leadership	44
People and Teams Operate Best from Their Strengths	44
Boards Operate Best from Their Strengths	44
Understanding Your Strengths	45
Strengths Theory and Positive Psychology	46
Gallup's StrengthsFinder Strengths	46
Going from Good to Great	52
A Strong Board Team	52
11. Matching Strengths to Board Responsibilities	54
Strengths Matches for "Provide Strategic Leadership"	54
Strengths Matches for "Ensure Abundant Resources"	57
Strengths Matches for "Provide Oversight"	63
Worksheet: Matching Strengths to Board Responsibilities	68
12. Conclusion: Leading with Strengths on a Nonprofit Board	74
Further Reading	75
13. Action Plan: Leading with Strengths on a Nonprofit Board	76
14. Next Steps	77
Read	77
Consider	78
Act!	78
15. Action Plan: Pulling It All Together	82
About the Author	83
Contact Me	85

Acknowledgments

This book is packed to the gills with ideas that are mostly not my own. I've taken bits and pieces of other people's ideas and tried to synthesize them into a set of ideas helpful for professionals who want to change the world.

I stand on the shoulders of giants.

Where I can remember the source of an idea, I've tried hard to cite it. I've doubtless repeatedly missed the boat here.

If you think I should add a credit or source, please tell me at john @johnfulwider.com, or on Twitter: @johnmfulwider.¹ It is crazy easy for me to update this book thanks to the good folks at [Leanpub](http://www.leanpub.com).² So don't hesitate to write.

¹<https://twitter.com/johnmfulwider>

²<http://www.leanpub.com>

Copyright Notice

Advance Your Career Through Nonprofit Board Service 1.4 (September 2014) by John M. Fulwider is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License.

This means you are free:

- to Share: to copy, distribute and transmit the work.
- to Remix: to adapt the work.

Under the following conditions:

- Attribution: You must attribute the work to John M. Fulwider and provide a link to johnfulwider.com (but not in any way that suggests I endorse you or your use of the work).
- Noncommercial: You may not use this work for commercial purposes.
- Share Alike: If you alter, transform, or build upon this work, you may distribute the resulting work only under the same or similar license to this one.

1. Introduction

“ In my view, nonprofit board service is the ultimate leadership opportunity, giving business executives the personal and professional skills they need in this new world.

—Alice Korngold

You want to invest in your profession, the causes you care about, and yourself, but your time and energy are limited. You need one approach to amplify your effectiveness and impact in all three domains at once. Here's the approach: Strengths-based leadership on a nonprofit board.

With the exercises and information in this book, you will:

- Discover that it's perfectly legitimate to use nonprofit and community board service to advance your professional career—if you have a genuine passion for the organization's mission, and you can say with integrity that you're contributing talents and skills the organization's board needs. Nonprofit board service gives you leadership development opportunities that can help you excel in your profession as well.
- Identify nonprofit and community organizations that fit your passions; match your skills and talents to their needs; and plan to perform leadership roles with excellence.
- Learn your own strengths and how you can use them to get better results in your professional pursuits.
- Learn to form strengths-based board leadership teams, so you can have greater impact when you serve on nonprofit boards of directors and with your professional association. This way you'll have the strongest people taking the lead on fulfilling board responsibilities, instead of simply the people who can't say no or (worse) the people who were absent from the meeting when committee chairs were assigned.
- Complete a matrix mapping your and your colleagues' strengths to their responsibilities. You can then use the matrix, and the resources in this book, to take your own leadership team, and/or any board of directors on which you serve, from good to great.

Your profession, the causes you care about, and your own personal development matter. Strengths-based leadership ties them all together into a win-win-win with your leadership at the center.

Aim of the Book

With this book, I aim to:

Inspire you to see the fantastic mission impact you can create for causes you care about, when you lead with strengths on nonprofit boards of directors.

Persuade you that nonprofit board service is all about the mission. Only serve as a director if you're genuinely passionate about the mission. If you're not, you're hurting yourself, your family, and the nonprofit organization. Also, you must commit to excellent, engaged leadership; anything less hurts the mission.

Excite you, because board service is an excellent way to develop leadership strengths that will help you in your career or business. It's perfectly legitimate to use board service for professional advancement, so long as that's a secondary goal behind leading with excellence an organization whose mission truly fires you up.

Teach you what to expect from board service. I'll show you the 10 responsibilities and privileges you have as a nonprofit board member, and how to find the right board for you.

Help you turn all these ideas into action. This book is a workbook packed with worksheets and action plan templates. I want you to write in this book (or take notes digitally in the ebook) so it becomes a tool you use to merge your professional, philanthropic, and even personal missions for greater impact—impact that really matters to you, and the people and causes you care about.

Quick Overview of the Contents

You can lead the way toward a changed world as a nonprofit organization board member. It's hard to find more fulfilling work, and boards need your energy, perspective, leadership strengths, and skills. This workbook gives you a high-level introduction to board service, helps you identify the right board for you, and helps you plan to advance your career through developing leadership strengths that apply in your board service and your day job.

Following are brief descriptions of the book parts and chapters to come:

Worksheets and Action Plans Throughout

I want you to learn not just the basics from this workbook, but to walk away with a plan for finding a board to serve. After you complete these worksheets, you'll be well-positioned to choose the board you can give your best in terms of commitment to its mission, your leadership strengths, and fit with one of the 10 responsibilities of nonprofit leadership.

In every part, there's an Action Plan that challenges you to think about:

- Your envisioned future. When you've successfully applied the ideas in this book, how will you, the nonprofit organization, your career, and the world have changed?

- Your purpose statement. Why do you want to achieve this future?
- Your current reality. What are the gaps between today and your envisioned future?
- Specific action commitments. What will you do to create your envisioned future?
- Action partner. Who will serve you as a thinking partner and accountability partner?

The action plan templates are here because this book isn't about fancy ideas. It's about taking action to change yourself and change the world.

Part I: Advancing Your Career through Nonprofit Board Service

It's About the Mission

If you are not rabidly passionate about the mission, don't join that organization's board—you'll be occupying a spot a truly passionate person could fill, to great effect.

It's About You

What? You just said it's about the mission! True—but it's also about you developing your leadership skills in fulfilling the mission. That's a perfectly legitimate way to advance your career through board service. Here's what's not legitimate: Taking a board seat for the résumé line.

Part II: Understanding Nonprofit Board Leadership

Ten Responsibilities and Privileges

As a board member you get to do 10 things on the way to changing the world! That's a blessing, not a burden. In this chapter I make a brief and bulletproof (!) argument for this positive view of your responsibilities, which I reframe as privileges. Bonus: I distill the list of 10 down to a much more memorable three.

What to Expect from Board Service

This section presents national statistics on time commitment and board diversity. One thing's clear: Boards really need younger members.

Finding the Right Board

Here are four questions to ask yourself, along with qualities to look for: organized recruitment and board size. Tip: Proceed with your eyes wide open.

Part III: Leading with Strengths on Nonprofit Boards

Why Strengths Matter for Leadership

Next I'm going to introduce strengths psychology, which is the idea that you're better off developing your strengths than struggling against your weaknesses.

Matching Strengths to Board Responsibilities

This is the chapter I'm most excited about. I provide a blueprint I've created for matching strengths to responsibilities. These are strengths I've found in my experience and study are especially well suited to performing these responsibilities.

Next Steps

Next Steps suggests resources you can read and use to take your boards from good to great in fulfilling several of your basic responsibilities.

Board service is a great honor and privilege. You get to lead the way toward changing the world. Here's to your success!

—John M. Fulwider, Ph.D.

Lincoln, Neb.

I Advance Your Career through Nonprofit Board Service

“ In my view, nonprofit board service is the ultimate leadership opportunity, giving business executives the personal and professional skills they need in this new world. Furthermore, there's a win-win in this leadership development arrangement. By serving on non-profit and global nongovernmental boards, business people provide invaluable skills, expertise, and resources in strengthening organizations that address vital issues, while gaining unique experience in working with people from diverse backgrounds on missions of common interest.

—Alice Korngold

2. It's About the Mission

If you are not rabidly passionate about the mission, don't join that organization's board—you'll be occupying a spot a truly passionate person could fill, to great effect.

How will the world be different tomorrow as a result of what we do here today? That's the question all board members should ask whenever they apply time, talent or treasure to changing the world.

Do you grasp that? As a board member, you get to be part of your organization's mission impact: a world changed for the better. In fact, you get to be **responsible** for this mission impact—you get to **lead** it. Working for a changed world isn't fluff or Pollyanna-like optimism; rather, it's the highest calling and the only outcome we'll accept.

Mission Impact Defined

Rock star philanthropist Bono hopes to "tear a little corner off of the darkness." Nonprofit sector advocate and consultant extraordinaire Hildy Gottlieb calls it creating the future: "a world that functions from humanity's highest potential—a world that is healthy, vibrant, compassionate, resilient and at peace." I call it making the world a better place for my family and friends.

Friends, we are in it to win it—to improve the world in measurable and sustainable ways. Mission impact is what makes it all worthwhile. Call it tearing a little corner off of the darkness; creating the future; or making the world a better place for your family and friends. Call it whatever you want. When we can prove to others we've moved the world in the direction our mission called for, and that the world's going to keep moving that direction, that's mission impact.

All Kinds of Ways to Change the World

“ Imagine what would have happened if 50 years ago, someone had said, “We’re going to send a man to the moon and back. And we’re going to do that in less than 10 years.” Oh yeah. We did say that. And it happened.

—Hildy Gottlieb, co-founder, Creating the Future

Friends, you can change the world for the better by helping lead any one of an astonishingly diverse set of organizations. Nonprofit organizations contribute to the public good at all levels.

International

Based in my hometown of Lincoln, Nebraska, is **Tiny Hands International**, which aims to end human trafficking and has children's homes in Nepal and Bangladesh.

Also based in Lincoln is **Shared Vision International**, which takes optometrists and non-medical volunteers to places like Haiti to give free eye exams to kids and adults and match them with donated eyeglasses.

Rotary International, with clubs all over the world (and the 14th ever established, in Lincoln!) is *this close* to eliminating polio, working in some of the world's most inaccessible places to accomplish universal vaccination long enough to eradicate the disease.

National

At the national level in the United States, no one need worry about infant paralysis because **March of Dimes** completely eliminated polio in this country.

NeighborWorks America creates opportunities for people to live in affordable homes, improve their lives and strengthen their communities.

State

At the state level in Nebraska, the **American Red Cross Nebraska/Southwest Iowa Region** provides critical relief efforts in times of disaster.

Local

In Lincoln, Nebraska, **MilkWorks** help families succeed with breastfeeding.¹ When our first child was born after a four-year battle with infertility, she had plenty of lactation problems. So we took her directly from the hospital to MilkWorks.

NeighborWorks Lincoln keeps Lincoln a safe and prosperous community by revitalizing neighborhoods and promoting homeownership.

On Your Doorstep

Finally, guess which nonprofit organization is on your very doorstep from mid January to late February? That's right, the **Girl Scouts of America**!

¹It's remarkably difficult! As in, "How the heck did the human race survive?" difficult.

Some Types of Nonprofit Organizations

- International and foreign affairs organizations, such as overseas relief and development assistance organizations.
- Arts, culture, and humanities organizations, such as museums, orchestras, and community theaters.
- Civil and human rights organizations, such as groups working on behalf of the rights of women, racial and ethnic minorities, elderly, or disabled people.
- Membership organizations and professional associations.
- Human services organizations like homeless shelters and food pantries.

The opportunities to make real change are countless. If you can't find an organization in the nonprofit sector whose mission you're rabidly passionate about, you are not looking hard enough.

Serve for the Right Reasons

There are lots of good organizations. Choose to lead only the one or two you're passionate about. The mission deserves no less.

Now, I'm not talking about doing something out of guilt or shame because you think you have to give something back. That only leads to resentment and self-righteousness. I am instead talking about using your leadership in ways that nurture you, that mean something to you.

In some cases, it means stepping up as a volunteer for your kids' sports or after-school programs. It could also mean getting involved on the board of a cause you feel passionate about. This kind of leadership only works if it nurtures you, if it inspires you, and if what you are doing fits your personality style and preferences.

Leaders have a vision and see possibilities, and want to use their talents to contribute and serve. But you have to choose things that work for your schedule, energy level, and interests.

Don't Overcommit

Choose quality over quantity. Pick one or at most two organizations to serve, and go deep. I've worked with far too many overcommitted board members, and trust me, they're not doing the mission (or, indeed, their families) any favors.

Worksheet: It's About the Mission

Use this worksheet to get you thinking about what you're passionate about, and then discover which organizations have missions that match your passion.



What five things do you want to change about the world?

What five actions would best make those things happen?

What are five nonprofit organizations changing the world the way you want, in the way you think best?



Example

For example, one thing I want to change about the world is the lack of widespread, high-quality breastfeeding assistance. In my ideal world, every family can succeed at breastfeeding (if they choose it) because they can get lactation assistance, regardless of their ability to pay.

One action that would best accomplish that change is establishing community breastfeeding centers, supported by donations and earned income.

Milkworks is changing the world that way.

3. It's About You

“ Serving as a board member is one of the most challenging and rewarding of volunteer assignments.

—BoardSource

The people I work with are their best when they merge their personal, professional, and philanthropic missions.

Merging your missions means taking every opportunity to apply personal growth in one mission area to one or both of the others. One of the easiest mergers, and yet the most fulfilling, is advancing your career through nonprofit board service. Specifically, boards are great places to develop your leadership skills in a way that makes a difference both for the nonprofit's mission and for your own business or employer.

It's perfectly legitimate to do this when you're serving an organization about whose mission you're truly passionate. But please don't join a board just to pad your résumé; doing so cheats the organization's mission and robs you, your family and your friends of the better world you could be creating.

Develop Your Leadership Strengths

“ [V]olunteer managers must be adept leaders and persuaders as they tackle all the same management issues they face in their corporations ...

—Karl Moore

Make no mistake, directing a nonprofit organization is a leadership role with great purpose. That great purpose is the mission. A Teach for America alumnus had it right: "To simply be the best new teacher isn't enough. Winning for the sake of students is the only option."

As you're serving the mission, you can and should be serving yourself. As Karl Moore writes in *Forbes*:¹

The management environment in volunteer organizations is often extremely challenging. Without the compensation and organizational authority to keep their teams productive and working toward shared goals, volunteer managers must be adept leaders and persuaders as they tackle all the same management issues they face in their corporations . . .

Indeed, nonprofit board leadership is fascinatingly complex and difficult. It's also a great place to develop your leadership strengths as you face all the same challenges you'll face in your day job:

- Setting objectives
- Developing strategies
- Raising and allocating funds
- Motivating and guiding people
- Complying with regulatory structures

The solution to these leadership challenges is developing the leadership strengths Tom Rath and Barry Conchie describe in their book *Strengths-Based Leadership*. You'll do the organization you help lead a great favor when you develop your strengths to make a uniquely valuable contribution as part of a strong board leadership team. Then, you can apply these leadership skills to your day job, as well.

I'll cover leadership strengths in much greater detail in Part III of this book, but here's a preview for those who can't wait or don't feel like flipping ahead and then back.

Lead from Your Strengths

Gallup's StrengthsFinder assessment tells you which of 34 individual strengths you express most readily. The following four leadership strengths summarize eight or nine, each, of the 34 individual strengths. They are useful categories to keep complementary strengths straight in your mind.

Executing: These leaders know how to make things happen. When you need someone to implement a solution, these leaders will work tirelessly to get it done. Leaders who execute well have the ability to "catch" an idea and make it a reality.

Influencing: These leaders help their team reach a much broader audience. They are always selling the team's ideas inside and outside the organization. When you need someone to take charge, speak up, and make sure your group is heard, these are your leaders.

Relationship Building: These leaders are the essential glue that holds a team together. Without these strengths on a team, in many cases, the group is simply a composite of individuals. In contrast, these leaders create groups and organizations that are much greater than the sum of their parts.

¹<http://www.forbes.com/sites/karlmoore/2011/12/21/volunteering-a-great-way-to-learn-real-executive-leadership/>

Strategic Thinking: These leaders keep us all focused on what could be. They are constantly absorbing and analyzing information and helping the team make better decisions. They continually stretch our thinking for the future.

Source: Adapted from Tom Rath and Barry Conchie, *Strengths-Based Leadership: Great Leaders, Teams, and Why People Follow* (Gallup Press, 2009).

Benefits for Your Career

When you develop your leadership strengths in the nonprofit sector, [Karl Moore writes in *Forbes*](#),² you gain these benefits for your career:

- Preparing for a senior executive position.
- Gaining experience and networking opportunities.
- Practicing “permission leadership”—leading by earning the trust and respect of your direct reports.
- Learning to reconcile “the various, and often conflicting, demands of a multitude of stakeholders.”

If your company sponsors you, it can help get your company’s name out there, too, and increase business connections. Corporate citizenship is called *corporate* citizenship for a reason.

Let’s be honest about community service. It is rarely about pure service to others. It gets your name out there. It forges new relationships to build your personal powerbase.

Board service also teaches you how to form leadership teams. Coming up in Part III is strengths-based board leadership. The big idea is that boards of directors are leadership teams. Another key idea is individual board members don’t have to be well-rounded, but teams should be. Think for a brief moment about nonprofit board committees. You’d want people who have strengths and interests in relevant areas to be members of, say, the strategic thinking committee.

Knowing how to form such strengths-based leadership teams will greatly benefit you in your career, whether it’s building your own business or working for your employer.

You Can Do It Now

I don’t know where you are in your career right now. Maybe you’re just getting started, maybe you’re firmly established. But I’ve got good news for you if you’re more on the “just getting started”

²<http://www.forbes.com/sites/karlmoore/2011/12/21/volunteering-a-great-way-to-learn-real-executive-leadership/>

end of things: You can experience all of this fascinating leadership development right now, whereas you might not get promoted to those levels of responsibility in your day job for some time now.

That said, you may find yourself in the minority. Younger people are greatly underrepresented on nonprofit boards. You may encounter resistance to new ideas you bring. You may even hear the dreaded phrase, “We’ve always done it this way.”

But in your day job, you’re going to be in the minority from time to time, regardless of your age or experience. For instance, you might be the only marketing expert on a project team. And in your day job, you will encounter status quo thinking, and path-dependent thinking, and all sorts of creativity-quashers that hold organizations back.

Great news! These are opportunities to apply your leadership strengths.

Worksheet: It's About You

This worksheet challenges you to be intentional about your leadership development. What leadership strengths do you need to develop for your day job? What strengths would you need to develop for board service? How can specific board roles and tasks help you fill gaps in your résumé?

Instructions: Refer for now to the box, “Lead from Your Strengths,” found earlier in this chapter. You may need to come back to this worksheet after reading the Leading with Strengths on Nonprofit Boards chapters in Part III.



Which leadership strength do you use most in your day job?

How do you use that strength?

Which leadership strength would you like to further develop in your board service?

How will you develop that strength through board service?

(continued on next page)



What's a current business problem that needs strong leadership to solve it?

What will your role be in solving it?

Here are 12 tasks board members can be called upon to do. Think about gaps in your résumé, or interesting work you've always wanted to try. Circle three tasks that, if you did them to advance the organization's mission, would also help fill gaps in your résumé or give you new work experience, and advance your career.

-
- | | |
|---|---|
| Revise the organization's mission statement. | Train new board members in financial literacy. |
| Plan for the CEO's succession. | Recruit and interview prospective new board members. |
| Benchmark the CEO's compensation against comparable organizations. | Revise the organization's bylaws and articles of incorporation. |
| Revamp board agendas to focus on strategic thinking. | Give interviews to the media about the organization. |
| Design a dashboard to monitor program performance. | Lead effective and efficient meetings. |
| Plan a for-profit subsidiary to diversify the organization's revenue. | Cultivate new partners in the community. |

4. Conclusion: Advance Your Career through Nonprofit Board Service

If you are not rabidly passionate about the mission, don't join that organization's board—you'll be occupying a spot a truly passionate person could fill, to great effect.

The It's About the Mission worksheet got you thinking about what you're passionate about, so you could then discover which organizations have missions that match your passion.

It's about the mission, but it's also about you developing your leadership skills in fulfilling the mission. That's a perfectly legitimate way to advance your career through board service. Here's what's not legitimate: Taking a board seat for the résumé line.

The It's About You worksheet challenged you to be intentional about your leadership development. What leadership strengths do you need to develop for your day job? What strengths would you need to develop for board service? How can specific board roles and tasks help you fill gaps in your résumé?

Before we leave Part I, remember:

- Complete the Action Plan for Part I. Don't make this just theory, or a nice learning experience. Do something with what you've learned.
- There are suggestions for further reading on the next page.

The next part is Understanding Nonprofit Board Leadership.

Further Reading

“Volunteering - A Great Way To Learn Real Executive Leadership”¹ by Karl Moore in *Forbes*

This is the piece I reference extensively in the preceding chapters.

“Nonprofit Boards: Boot Camp for Corporate Executives”² by Alice Korngold in *The Huffington Post*

Alice Korngold rocks. She has trained and placed several hundred corporate executives on global, national, and regional nongovernmental organization/nonprofit boards of directors.

“Philanthropy: Is Your Company Squandering a CSR Opportunity?”³ by Alice Korngold in *Fast Company*

Board service is a win-win-win, Korngold writes, because it benefits your company, the nonprofit, and the community.

“How to Research a Nonprofit—Deep-Dive Approach”⁴ by The Bridgespan Group

A comprehensive guide that focuses on three questions to ask before making a philanthropic investment: 1. Does the organization’s mission align with your personal philanthropic goals? 2. Is the organization well-positioned to carry out the proposed project? 3. Can you work well together? While the article’s about due diligence to perform before donating money, a smart person like you can easily see how the principles apply to donating your time and talent in nonprofit board service.

¹<http://www.forbes.com/sites/karlmoore/2011/12/21/volunteering-a-great-way-to-learn-real-executive-leadership/>

²http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alice-korngold/nonprofit-leadership_b_1287793.html

³<http://www.fastcompany.com/1721592/philanthropy-your-company-squandering-csr-opportunity>

⁴<http://www.bridgespan.org/Philanthropy-Advice/Researching-Nonprofits/Due-Diligence-Tool/How-to-Research-a-Nonprofit—Deep-Dive-Approach>

5. Action Plan: Advance Your Career through Nonprofit Board Service



Your Envisioned Future: When you've successfully begun developing your leadership skills through board service, what will these people and things look like? How will they have changed?

You ~ The nonprofit organization ~ Your career ~ The world

Your Purpose Statement: Why do you want to achieve this future?

Your Current Reality: What's your current reality? What are the gaps between today and your envisioned future?

Specific Action Commitments: What will you commit to doing to create your envisioned future?

Action Partner: To whom will you be accountable to take action? When will she/he call you to check on your progress?

II Understanding Nonprofit Board Leadership

“ Unfortunately, sloppy matches of executives to board positions give nonprofit board service a bad name. The worst possible scenario is a candidate who winds up on a board with a misunderstanding of the circumstances and expectations.

—Alice Korngold

6. Ten Responsibilities and Privileges

“ In the great green room there was a red balloon and a picture of the cow jumping over the moon.

—*Goodnight Moon*

As a board member you get to do 10 things on the way to changing the world! That's a blessing, not a burden. In this chapter I make a brief and bulletproof (!) argument for this positive view of your responsibilities, which I reframe as privileges. Bonus: I distill the list of 10 down to a much more memorable three.

Board members have 10 responsibilities individually and collectively. But I think these responsibilities are best framed in your mind as **privileges**: things you both **have to do** and things you **get to do** on the way to big and lasting mission impact.

That's a blessing, not a burden. You have to do these things to maintain the public's trust, but the reward for the public's trust is getting to do these things that change the world.

I have the responsibility of putting my older daughter to bed most nights, which involves reading the same story for the hundredth time. But this, too, is something I get to do.

Reading *Goodnight Moon* with a sleepy little bundle in my lap? That's a blessing, not a burden. Board service, likewise, is something you get to do. You get to change the world for the better. For my sleepy little bundle and yours.

Three Summary Responsibilities

The 10 responsibilities, what we're calling privileges, come from BoardSource, one of the gold standards in nonprofit board research, training, and advocacy. Remember that we're looking at them as privileges, things you get to do on the way to changing the world. That's a blessing, not a burden.

Another blessing is that I've distilled the list of 10 down to a much more memorable three ...

1. Provide strategic leadership
2. Ensure abundant resources
3. Provide oversight

... which I shall now cover in a bit more detail:

Provide Strategic Leadership

This is an easy one. Rephrased, it would be, “It’s all about the mission. My job is to lead everyone forward from the mission as often as possible, and back to the mission whenever necessary.” Or as BoardSource senior governance consultant Vernetta Walker says:

Our decisions should stem from our mission, our planning should stem from our mission, and everything we do should essentially be in furtherance of our mission.

As you'll see in the tables below, **Provide Strategic Leadership** summarizes two responsibilities:

- Determine mission and purpose
 - Ensure effective planning



Reflection

Read the responsibility descriptions in the chart below. If you're already serving on a board, or have in the past, draw hash marks on the lines next to each responsibility to rate:

1. Your own performance in fulfilling that responsibility
 2. The board's overall performance
 3. That responsibility's importance to the organization's mission (relative to the other responsibilities)

Provide Strategic Leadership

Determine mission and purpose. Create and review a statement of mission and purpose that articulates the organization's goals, means and primary constituents served.

Ensure effective planning. Actively participate in an overall planning process and assist in implementing and monitoring the plan's goals.

Ensure Abundant Resources

Ensure Abundant Resources encompasses these four responsibilities:

- Ensure abundant financial resources
- Select the chief executive
- Build a competent board
- Enhance the organization's public standing

This does mean, yes, being on board financially in the sense of making a personally meaningful financial contribution to the organization every year. But it's human resources as well, in the form of a quality CEO, quality board colleagues, and a well-developed corps of non-board volunteers.

Also, please don't miss the fact that the public's high regard for your organization is a resource. That means that anytime you speak well of your organization in public, you're fulfilling part of this responsibility. So speak well of your organization a lot!

For instance, you could announce your organization's upcoming event to any captive audience you have—such as the one I have (figuratively) in front of me right now. So let me tell you about my organization.

The Nebraska Chapter of the American Society for Public Administration promotes excellence in public and nonprofit administration. One way we do that is recognizing excellence through three awards we give at our annual luncheon. We recognize the outstanding elected official of the year, the outstanding public administrator of the year, and the outstanding nonprofit administrator of the year.

Professionals in the public and nonprofit sectors keep us and our families safe, educate our children, care for the most needy among us, and generally make our world a better place to live. But public and nonprofit service can be thankless tasks, so it's important to remind the public of these important professionals and encourage the professionals themselves. So that's why we recognize them each year.

Here's how you can help. I believe each one of you here must know at least one outstanding public servant worthy of recognition, so I'm asking you to fill out and return a nomination form before February 24.^[^fn_actual_text]

Did you like that? I just fulfilled one of my 10 responsibilities without even breaking a sweat.



Reflection

Read the responsibility descriptions in the chart below. If you're already serving on a board, or have in the past, draw hash marks on the lines next to each responsibility to rate:

1. Your own performance in fulfilling that responsibility
2. The board's overall performance
3. That responsibility's importance to the organization's mission (relative to the other responsibilities)

Ensure Abundant Resources

Ensure abundant financial resources.

Secure abundant resources for the organization to fulfill its mission.

Select the chief executive. Reach consensus on the chief executive's responsibilities and undertake a careful search to find the most qualified individual for the position.

Build a competent board. Articulate prerequisites for candidates, orient new members, and periodically and comprehensively evaluate your own performance.

Enhance the organization's public standing. Clearly articulate the organization's mission, accomplishments and goals to the public and garner support from the community.

Abundant vs. Sufficient

Let me tell you why I'm using the word abundant to describe the resources board members are responsible for securing.

I respect BoardSource a lot, but their manual on board responsibilities sets ensuring "sufficient" financial resources as the standard. That's not good enough, nor inspiring.

The nonprofit sector must strive for abundant resources for at least two reasons:

1. To free its leaders from day-to-day "keeping the lights on" worries so they can focus on long-term mission impact.
2. To finally eradicate the poisonous scarcity thinking that severely limits the sector's effectiveness.

We can and should ensure abundant resources. There is a path away from thinking all the time in terms of scarcity and deficit.

Provide Oversight

You get to monitor and strengthen the organization's actual programs and services. You get to ensure the organization stays above reproach legally and ethically. You get to keep a close eye on the finances to guard the trust of all the donors, and likely taxpayers as well, who contributed to your organization.

Provide Oversight summarizes four responsibilities:

- Monitor, and strengthen programs and services
- Ensure legal and ethical integrity
- Protect assets and provide proper financial oversight
- Support and evaluate the chief executive

Provide oversight also covers the duties of care, loyalty and obedience you've likely heard about if you've already been around nonprofit boards and governance. Just by way of quick review:

- The duty of care means you're obligated to exercise reasonable care when performing your responsibilities.
- The duty of loyalty means you must always put the organization first, and must never use your position on the board for personal gain.

- And my favorite duty, the duty of obedience, means that it's all about the mission. You must not act in a way contrary to the organization's mission.

You can fulfill one of your responsibilities simply by reading the board book carefully and preparing lots of probing questions. Friends, it may make meetings last longer, but you have to be asking these questions. It's your responsibility, and it's simultaneously one of the easiest and most important to fulfill.



Reflection

Read the responsibility descriptions in the chart below. If you're already serving on a board, or have in the past, draw hash marks on the lines next to each responsibility to rate:

1. Your own performance in fulfilling that responsibility
2. The board's overall performance
3. That responsibility's importance to the organization's mission (relative to the other responsibilities)

Provide Oversight	
Monitor, and strengthen programs and services. Determine which programs are consistent with the organization's mission and monitor their effectiveness.	_____
Ensure legal and ethical integrity. Adhere to legal standards and ethical norms.	_____
Protect assets and provide proper financial oversight. Assist in developing the annual budget and ensuring proper financial controls are in place.	_____
Support and evaluate the chief executive. Ensure the chief executive has the moral and professional support she or he needs to further the goals of the organization.	_____

Even summarized down to three, this is an imposing list of responsibilities. Fortunately, fulfilling these responsibilities grows out of a genuine passion for the mission.

Governance Boards vs. Working Boards

Governance boards make the big decisions and hire staff to implement them.

Working boards make big decisions and implement them as well, typically because they are small organizations with few or no staff members. (However, some large organizations, such as professional associations, have working boards on purpose, because involving the professionals in the association work advances both the professional goals of the board members and the mission of the association.)

Committee Work to Fulfill the Ten Responsibilities

Many boards split up their work with committees. Here is a list of committees a board might have, and which of the 10 responsibilities that committee might fulfill.

- **Executive Committee**
 - Selecting the chief executive
 - Ensuring legal and ethical integrity
 - Supporting and evaluating the chief executive
- **Finance Committee**
 - Protecting assets and providing proper financial oversight
- **Fundraising Committee**
 - Ensuring abundant financial resources
- **Governance/Nominating Committee**
 - Building a competent board
- **Marketing Committee**
 - Enhancing the organization's public standing
- **Strategic Thinking Committee**
 - Determining mission and purpose
 - Ensuring effective planning
 - Monitoring, and strengthening programs and services

That said, some of the most effective boards I've seen have no standing committees, because they use the policy governance model to think ahead of time about the 10 responsibilities. They then write policies for the chief executive to follow, and the ongoing work of the board involves monitoring (in batches) the CEO's performance against those policies.

The policy governance model might sound difficult to understand, but don't worry. Most policy governance boards I've seen have solid policies requiring thorough board member on-boarding and ongoing instruction. In fact, I'd go so far to say that if you're choosing between serving on two boards where all else is equal (especially your passionate commitment to both missions), go with the policy governance board.

How the Ten Responsibilities Lead to Mission Impact

Let me share with you some brief illustrations I've come up with of the direct line from the 10 responsibilities to mission impact. I want you to see just how important these 10 things you get to do are. They lead directly to mission impact.

Provide Strategic Leadership

Determine mission and purpose

Setting mission → Periodic opportunities to fine-tune mission → Focused effort → Mission impact

Ensure effective planning

Making strategic thinking a regular practice → Stimulating conversations about a brighter future → Longer, deeper conversations at planning retreats → Continually aligned resources → Mission impact

When you make strategic thinking an item on every board agenda, you have stimulating conversations about the brighter future your organization is trying to create for you, your family, and your friends. This leads to longer, deeper conversations at planning retreats, which are engaging instead of something to be endured. These longer, deeper conversations give you the insights you need to continually align your organization's resources to make bigger and more lasting mission impact.

Ensure Abundant Resources

Ensure abundant financial resources

Diverse revenue streams → Less scarcity thinking, more abundance thinking → Happier board and staff → More effective work toward mission impact → Mission impact

Select the chief executive

Right person driving the bus + Regular driving tests → Organization driving toward mission impact → Mission impact

Build a competent board

Rigorous application and orientation → Right people on the bus → Less managing up by CEO → More time, resources for mission impact → Mission impact

“ A good board is a victory, not a gift.

—Cyril O. Houle, *Governing Boards: Their Nature and Nurture*

When you have a rigorous application process for prospective board members, and when you have a rigorous orientation process for those few people who make it past the application process, you get the right people on the bus and in the right seats.

This makes the CEO's job a lot easier because she or he doesn't have manage up as much. And by managing up I mean teaching the board to lead, when the board should be teaching itself. This gives the CEO more time to work on delivering big and lasting mission impact.

Let me give you a quick statistic on managing up. BoardSource's national survey of the nonprofit sector is called the BoardSource Nonprofit Governance Index. The survey found CEOs spend an average 22 hours per month on board and committee work. What if boards could get that down by developing themselves? What would that make possible for the mission?

Enhance the organization's public standing

Serving as ambassadors and advocates → Free publicity for the organization → Public trust and support → Mission impact

Provide Oversight

Monitor, and strengthen programs and services

Evaluating programs' mission impact → More resources for those making a real, measurable difference → Mission impact

Ensure legal and ethical integrity

Operating above reproach → Steering clear of people's perverse desire to see "do gooders" doing wrong → Public trust and support → Mission impact

Protect assets and provide proper financial oversight

Minding the till → Money in the till to pay staff → Functioning programs → Mission impact

Support and evaluate the chief executive

A superb board-CEO partnership where the board is still clearly in control → Clear roles and expectations for both parties → Freedom for the parties to perform best in their roles → Mission impact

What to Expect from Board Service

Changing the world is a fair amount of work.

Time Commitment

According to Linda Crompton, the former BoardSource president, you can expect to commit 75 to 100 hours per year to the mid-sized, average board. That's in person time at board meetings and committee meetings, as well as prep work and reading before those meetings.

Lots of Reading

You've heard the saying that all leaders are readers? That's especially true of board leaders. I'm not going to sugar coat it: Being a responsible board leader takes a bunch of preparation. To exercise proper oversight you must read board packets. Financial documents. Program reports. Maybe the latest stories from beneficiaries about how the organization changed their lives.

There's a lot of reading.

Boards Lack Age Diversity

If you're young, you'll notice the low number of board members in your age group. You may find yourself in the minority. You may encounter resistance to new ideas. You may even hear the dreaded phrase, "We've always done it this way."

But in your day job, you're going to be in the minority too. For instance, you might be only marketing expert on a project team. And in your day job, you will encounter status quo thinking.

Great news! It's an opportunity to apply your leadership strengths.

Engagement, and the Lack Thereof

“ Having everyone engaged makes the board stronger. Do you want to be part of a team where 20 people are playing hard and getting their jerseys dirty or do you want to be on a team where seven people are playing hard and everyone else is sitting on the sidelines?

—Wayne Luke, partner, The Bridgespan Group¹

In board service, you will encounter board members who are disengaged—meaning they’re just filling a chair, and not contributing anything. The Pareto principle applies on boards just as it does in every field of human endeavor: 20 percent of the people generate 80 percent of the results.

You will hear (or overhear) nonprofit staff members talking about how they wish they had an engaged board. That means they want board members to be just as passionate and knowledgeable about the mission, the organization, and each of its programs as they are.

Now, I believe that’s too tall an order—it’s their day job, not yours. As a board member you neither can learn, nor should learn, every operational detail. (That’s why you select, support, and evaluate the CEO!)

But you can, and should, be highly engaged—well-informed, asking questions, and looking for ways you can volunteer your talents in a way that matches a current or future organizational need.

You’re going to encounter disengaged people in your day job, as well. There’s a reason The Gallup Organization has built a [consulting empire](#)² around employee engagement, after all.

The Best Board Members

The best board members are ...

- Curious
- Learners
- Question askers

I just said the same thing three ways, right? Right! Feel free to ask me why; I’m sure you’re curious and want to learn the answer.

¹“Recruiting and Vetting Nonprofit Board Members” by The Bridgespan Group

²<http://www.gallup.com/strategicconsulting/en-us/employeeengagement.aspx?ref=f>

Worksheet: Ten Responsibilities and Privileges

Here you have a chance to identify in advance which responsibilities and privileges of board service excite you the most and the least, so you can make better decisions when offered committee service opportunities. You can also decide in advance how much time you would like to commit to board service.



Which of the ten responsibilities and privileges excite you the most? Write down three.

Which of the ten responsibilities and privileges excite you the least? Write down three.

How much time per month can you devote to board service?

Look again at the list of committees from earlier in the chapter. What kind of committee would interest you?

What kind of committee would not interest you?

(continued on next page)



Boards often need people with specific professional training—e.g., attorneys and accountants. Do you want to use your professional training in your board role, or would you rather serve the board with skills developed outside of your professional training?

Answer these questions if you now serve, or have served, on a nonprofit board.

Which three responsibilities and privileges is your board especially strong at fulfilling?

How will you further strengthen your performance?

Which three responsibilities and privileges is your board weak at fulfilling?

How will you manage around those weaknesses?

7. Finding the Right Board

After making a short list of organizations about whose missions you're passionate, next ...

Test Your Passion and Commitment

... by simply volunteering for the organization. You can directly do the work, or serve as an outside (non-board) member of a committee. Planning and fundraising committees for annual events make great places to start.¹

How, exactly? Don't complicate it or stress yourself out. Simply reach out any way you're comfortable to anyone you know at the organization, describe your passion for the mission, and say you'd like to contribute by volunteering. You might learn they're recruiting board members right now. You might learn they need non-board committee members. Either way, you'll be practicing an important board member responsibility: Sharing your passion for the mission with others.

“ I believe the single most important element in being a successful board member and helping to make a board much more effective is your own interest and passion in the work of that group.

—Linda Crompton, former president/CEO, BoardSource

Look for Organized Recruitment

A good indicator of a strong board is an organized recruitment process, where you're expected to complete an application, be interviewed by the nominating committee, and have your nomination considered—but not necessarily approved!—by the full board.

Look for Larger Board Sizes

Watch out for really small boards: They may indicate ineffective organizations that can't attract board members. Larger boards typically have more committees where you can quickly contribute. They're also rated more effective in national surveys (specifically, those with 15-22 members).

¹For example, I'm a member of NeighborWorks Lincoln's fundraising committee. I help host two meetings each month, where we introduce new potential friends of the organization to our mission, programs, and accomplishments. But though the committee includes board members, I am not on the board.

Of course, there are exceptions to every rule. I've observed boards like the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship's and alt.Consulting's operate with spectacular effectiveness, both with fewer than 10 members.

Proceed with Your Eyes Wide Open

Some boards won't meet some or even any of the above standards. That's a warning sign, but not a stop sign. If you're passionate about the mission and see yourself making a valuable contribution, go ahead and join the board. Just keep your eyes wide open, knowing your initial contribution may be helping the board do basic capacity-building tasks. That's important, mission-advancing work.

Questions to Ask Yourself

Goals: Are my goals the same as those of this organization and its board?

Contributions to the Mission: Can I contribute skills, experience, or expertise that will increase the impact of the organization and help it advance its mission?

Time Commitment: Am I prepared to commit the time required to fulfill my legal and fiduciary responsibilities as a board member?

Financial Commitment: Am I required to give/raise money for this board and can/will I do that?

Source: Adapted from The Bridgespan Group, “Nonprofit Boards: How to Find a Rewarding Board Position.”^a

^a<http://www.bridgespan.org/Publications-and-Tools/Nonprofit-Boards/Find-and-Join-a-Nonprofit-Board/How-Find-Rewarding-Board-Position>

Worksheet: Finding the Right Board

This is a checklist for when you get an interview with an organization interested in having you join the board.

Mission, Programs, Strategy

What is your mission?

How do your programs advance the mission?

How often is your strategic plan reviewed and evaluated?

Financial Status

How financially sound is the organization?

What is the organization's operating reserve?

How often do board members receive financial reports?

Clients or Constituencies

Whom does the organization serve?

How satisfied are your clients or constituencies with the organization?

How, and how often, do you ask clients/constituencies for their input on the organization's direction?

The Board

What's in the written job descriptions for the board as a whole and for individual board members?

What's in the descriptions of board committee functions and responsibilities?

How would you summarize the board's last self-evaluation?

What liability coverage does the organization have for directors and officers?

Expectations of Me

What are the ways you think I can contribute as a board member?

What is the board's role in fund-raising?

What specific annual financial contribution will I be expected to make?

What's the total time commitment?

What will my orientation to the organization and to the board's procedures involve?

What opportunities do you provide for board development and education?

The Organization's Staff

How satisfied is the board with the executive staff's performance?

How would you summarize the board's last evaluation of the CEO?

8. Conclusion: Understanding Nonprofit Board Leadership

As a board member you get to do 10 things on the way to changing the world! That's a blessing, not a burden. In Part II I made a brief and bulletproof (!) argument for this positive view of your responsibilities, which I reframed as privileges. Bonus: I distilled the list of 10 down to a much more memorable three.

I also showed how the ten responsibilities and privileges matter in terms of how they lead to mission impact. Finally, I told you what to expect from board service (a lot of reading!).

Two worksheets enabled you to:

- Identify in advance which responsibilities and privileges of board service excite you the most and the least, so you could make better decisions when offered committee service opportunities.
- Use a checklist when you got an interview with an organization interested in having you join the board.

Before we leave Part II, remember:

- Complete the Action Plan for Part II. Don't make this just theory, or a nice learning experience. Do something with what you've learned.
- There are suggestions for further reading on the next page.

The next part is Leading with Strengths on a Nonprofit Board.

Further Reading

Ten Basic Responsibilities of Nonprofit Boards, Second Edition by Richard T. Ingram (BoardSource, 2009).

The original source around which I've built this whole part of the book.

Ten Basic Responsibilities of Nonprofit Boards: The Companion Workbook (BoardSource, 2012).

The workbook provides:

- Bullet points on the **core concepts** behind the responsibility.
- **Questions** to answer in taking your board from good to great.
- **Group activities** that can easily be dropped in any 15-minute agenda slot.
- A case study with discussion questions that would make for a great 30-minute **strategic thinking slot** on your next board meeting agenda.

“Golden Rule of Board Resignations”¹ by Jan Masaoka, *Blue Avocado*

“At some point you may resign from a nonprofit board before your term is up. You might be angry, disappointed, or just too busy. Don’t botch your resignation: do it right.”

“Relationship Issues”² by Linda Crompton, *Exceptional Boards*

“When asked how she decides whether or not to serve on a nonprofit board, Phyllis said her number one criterion was whether or not the board and chief executive had an excellent relationship. She said, ‘I would rather spend my time helping the organization and the CEO be successful, instead of dealing with unproductive dynamics.’”

“The Match Game: Ensuring Fit—and Effectiveness—as a Nonprofit Board Member”³ by The Bridgespan Group

“If you’re seriously considering joining a nonprofit board, says Phyllis Yale, it’s a good idea to make sure that your passions and unique abilities are a good match with the organization’s mission and needs. But since you can’t be absolutely certain of that in advance, she suggests a good test: Do some specific volunteer work at a project level—sorting out a business issue on geographic reach, for instance—and in the process really get to know the organization’s leadership, how its board operates, and whether its leadership is open to new ideas.”

¹<http://blueavocado.org/content/golden-rule-board-resignations>

²<http://exceptionalboards.com/2011/07/20/relationship-issues-2/>

³<http://www.bridgespan.org/Publications-and-Tools/Nonprofit-Boards/Find-and-Join-a-Nonprofit-Board/Match-Game-Phyllis-Yale.aspx#.VAm6w2RdVzB>

“What Should I Know Before Joining the Board?”⁴ by BoardSource

“Prospective board members do themselves a service and show that they are serious about the commitments they make by asking some basic questions before joining an organization’s board.”

“Governance as Leadership: A Conversation with William Ryan”⁵ by The Bridgespan Group

” ... challenges traditional thinking about the role of nonprofit boards of directors with a new framework for understanding the modes in which boards govern. The authors ... describe two familiar governing modes ... fiduciary ... and strategic They then propose a third: generative, which is the capacity of the participants to wrestle with, in their words, the ‘sense of problems and opportunities’ that drives strategy, policy, and problem-solving in an organization. [The authors] suggest that while the fiduciary and strategic roles are familiar ground for most organizations, it is really in the generative mode that the opportunities for the board to add unique value occur.”

“Recruiting and Vetting Nonprofit Board Members”⁶ by The Bridgespan Group

Read this article to get a sense of the criteria desirable boards would use to determine whether you’re desirable as a new member.

“What Are the Legal Responsibilities of Nonprofit Boards?”⁷ by BoardSource

Covers the duties of care, loyalty, and obedience in more detail.

Giving 2.0: Transform Your Giving and Our World by Laura Arrillaga-Andreessen (Jossey-Bass, 2012)

Buy this book initially for Appendix IV: Jargon Buster, a readable guide to all the new terms you’ll encounter in nonprofit board service. Later, use the book for its intended purpose: Making your own philanthropy more focused and effective.

⁴<http://www.bridgespan.org/Publications-and-Tools/Nonprofit-Boards/Find-and-Join-a-Nonprofit-Board/What-Should-I-Know-Before-Joining-Board.aspx#.VAm9QmRdVzA>

⁵http://www.bridgespan.org/Publications-and-Tools/Nonprofit-Boards/Resources-for-Board-Members/Governance-as-Leadership-William-Ryan.aspx#.VAm_kGRdVzA

⁶<http://www.bridgespan.org/Publications-and-Tools/Hiring-Nonprofit-Leaders/Recruiting-Board-Members/Recruiting-and-Vetting-Nonprofit-Board-Members.aspx#.VAm-6mRdVzA>

⁷<http://www.bridgespan.org/Publications-and-Tools/Nonprofit-Boards/Nonprofit-Boards-101/Legal-Responsibilities-Nonprofit-Boards>

9. Action Plan: Understanding Nonprofit Board Leadership



Your Envisioned Future: When you've become a high-quality board member fulfilling your responsibilities with excellence, what will these people and things look like? How will they have changed?

You ~ The nonprofit organization ~ Your career ~ The world

Your Purpose Statement: Why do you want to achieve this future?

Your Current Reality: What's your current reality? What are the gaps between today and your envisioned future?

Specific Action Commitments: What will you commit to doing to create your envisioned future?

Action Partner: To whom will you be accountable to take action? When will she/he call you to check on your progress?

III Leading with Strengths on a Nonprofit Board

“ I've never met an effective leader who wasn't aware of his talents and working to sharpen them.

—General Wesley K. Clark

10. Why Strengths Matter for Leadership

“ [I]ndividuals gain more when they build on their talents, than when they make comparable efforts to improve their areas of weakness.

—Donald Clifton and James Harter¹

Why do strengths matter for leadership, and especially nonprofit board leadership? I've got two big ideas, and the second big idea has five smaller ideas. You ready for this?

People and Teams Operate Best from Their Strengths

People and teams operate best from their strengths. Donald Clifton, a father of strengths psychology, wrote that people “gain more when they build on their talents, than when they make comparable efforts to improve their areas of weakness.” My personal experience, and my observations of the nonprofit chief executives I coach and the teams they lead, have proven Clifton right time and again.

Boards Operate Best from Their Strengths

Boards operate best from their strengths. I have five sub-points to make:²

1. Boards are leadership teams.
2. Boards have a lot of responsibilities to their organizations and to the public trust. We're calling those privileges, as well, because they're things you get to do on the way to changing the world.
3. Fulfilling those responsibilities takes a certain set of strengths.
4. There is no Supermember who has all the necessary strengths.
5. Therefore we should form leadership teams and committees based on strengths, not individual board members' volunteer spirit or their absence from the meeting where leadership roles were assigned.

¹“Investing in Strengths” by Donald Clifton and James K. Harter; chapter in the book *Positive Organizational Scholarship: Foundations of a New Discipline* (Berret-Koehler Publishers, 2003).

²Yeesh, you can really tell I used to be an academic. You know what that Ph.D. after my name stands for, don't you? “Piled Higher and Deeper.”

Understanding Your Strengths

This isn't an official definition, but it's a helpful one. Strengths are your natural talents. They are things you can do well with less effort than things at which you are less strong. They are themes that define you. If you were to fill in the blanks in these sentences ...

- I've always had a knack for _____.
- People have always said I'm good at _____.
- I find that _____ comes naturally for me.

... those would be your strengths.

Another definition of strengths is those activities in which you consistently achieve near-perfect performance. For example, copy-editing other people's writing is a strength of mine; I rarely miss typos, and finding them is effortless for me.³ Think also of a professional tennis player's serve; she consistently gets the ball exactly where she wants.



Reflection

In which activities do you consistently achieve near-perfect performance?

For what have you always had a knack?

What have people always said you're good at?

What comes naturally for you?

(This is no time for humility. Answering these questions will help you get the most out of this book, so be honest.)

³OK, fellow grammar geeks. As you're rooting around this book for evidence of typographical hypocrisy, note that I wrote, "other people's writing."

Strengths Theory and Positive Psychology

“ All models are wrong, but some are useful.

—George P. Box

The theory here is Donald Clifton's strengths psychology—that people “gain more when they build on their talents, than when they make comparable efforts to improve their areas of weakness.”⁴ The application is Gallup's well-known StrengthsFinder assessments, which have helped millions of people identify and build their own strengths, plus work better in teams because they understand other people's strengths.⁵

Just a little history: Strengths psychology, or positive psychology, is important because it changed psychology's focus. Psychologists used to look at people as packages of things wrong with them, or deficits. Positive psychologists study things right with people, or strengths.

Also, a little home state pride here: Clifton was a professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln⁶ and is a father of strengths psychology. Gallup's StrengthsFinder (originally Clifton StrengthsFinder) is a Nebraska product. Go Huskers!

Gallup's StrengthsFinder Strengths

Knowing your strengths matters because you can get a lot more out of working to develop them than trying fix your weaknesses. This is true in board work, in your career, even your personal life.

To get the most of this book, you need to know your own strengths. You can learn them for just \$10 and 30 minutes of your time. Go to gallupstrengthscenter.com to take the StrengthsFinder assessment.⁷

⁴Why have I repeated this quotation for the third time now? Because research shows people still focus on their weaknesses, despite the voluminous research showing that's ineffective. They're like Sisyphus, pushing that boulder up the hill over and over again, only to have it roll back down.

⁵Are you one of those anti-assessment people who's constantly harping on the less-than-perfect psychometric properties of popular assessments like StrengthsFinder? Do you prefer Cronbach's alpha and test-retest reliability to business results and mission impact? Well, maybe nothing I can write will convince you. But I'll try anyway, because I'm an idealist. Popular assessments like StrengthsFinder are *wrong*, in that they reduce complex human thoughts and behavior into easily understood concepts that are simple to talk about. And there's their value: They're *useful*, in that they provide a simple common language for people to talk amongst themselves about the squillion and one things that make them different and, we hope, reach a shared understanding so they can take shared action to change the world we (take a breath, John!) *all share*. See that quotation on the previous page from George P. Box, no scientific slouch he? Well, there you go.

⁶Where I got all three of my degrees! Go Huskers!

⁷I don't work for Gallup, and I get no compensation other than happiness for recommending StrengthsFinder. I'm just a big fan of Gallup's products, especially now that they've relatively recently made the StrengthsFinder assessment so much easier to access online. You used to have to (Gasp! Horrors!) buy a book and use an access code printed inside. #aintnobodystoptimeforthat

Buy StrengthsFinder for Your Entire Board

To finish your project of bringing a strengths-based leadership focus to your board, you'll need to know your own strengths and, ideally, those of current and prospective board members. I strongly encourage you, pun intended, to buy yourself and all your colleagues the StrengthsFinder assessment, and perhaps copies of the book *Strengths-Based Leadership* as well. It's a tiny investment that will pay dividends your entire life.

On the following pages, you'll see four charts listing the four summary strengths (Executing, Influencing, Relationship Building, Strategic Thinking). Under each summary will be the eight or nine individual strengths that comprise it.

Executing: Knows how to make things happen. Can “catch” an idea and make it a reality.		1	2	3
Achiever	Has great stamina. Works hard. Great satisfaction from being busy and productive.			
Arranger	Organizes, but with flexibility. Likes to fit all the pieces together for maximum productivity.			
Belief	Has unchanging core values that define a purpose for life.			
Consistency/ Fairness	Keenly aware of the need to treat people the same. Tries to treat everyone fairly by setting up clear rules and adhering to them.			
Deliberative	Takes serious care in making decisions or choices. Anticipates the obstacles.			
Discipline	Enjoys routine and structure. Creates an ordered world.			
Focus	Takes a direction and follows through, with course corrections. Prioritizes, then acts.			
Responsibility	Takes psychological ownership of personal commitments. Committed to stable values.			
Restorative	Adept at dealing with problems. Good at figuring out what is wrong and resolving it.			



Reflection

How have you used these strengths in board service?

How have you used these strengths in your day job?

Start to understand your leadership team’s strengths (on your board, or at your day job):

1. Circle your own strengths above (if any in this category).
2. Think of three people on your board or leadership team you know well.
3. Guess at their strengths (don’t ask them, yet). In the numbered columns, make a check mark to indicate they definitely have that strength; make an X to indicate they definitely don’t; and use a question mark if you’re unsure.

Influencing: Helps the team reach a much broader audience. Always selling the team's ideas inside, outside the organization.		1	2	3
Activator	Can make things happen by turning thoughts into action. Often impatient.			
Command	Has presence. Can take control of a situation and make decisions.			
Communication	Generally finds it easy to put thoughts into words. Good conversationalist and presenter.			
Competition	Measures progress against others' performance. Strives to win first place in contests.			
Maximizer	Focuses on strengths to stimulate personal, group excellence.			
Self-Assurance	She feels confident in her own ability to manage her life. He possesses an inner compass giving him confidence his decisions are right.			
Significance	Wants to be very important in the eyes of others. Independent; wants to be recognized.			
Woo	Loves challenge of meeting new people, winning them over. Breaks ice, makes connections.			



Reflection

How have you used these strengths in board service?

How have you used these strengths in your day job?

Start to understand your leadership team's strengths (on your board, or at your day job):

1. Circle your own strengths above (if any in this category).
2. Think of three people on your board or leadership team you know well.
3. Guess at their strengths (don't ask them, yet). In the numbered columns, make a check mark to indicate they definitely have that strength; make an X to indicate they definitely don't; and use a question mark if you're unsure.

Relationship Building: Holds a team together. Creates groups that are much greater than the sum of their parts.		1	2	3
Adaptability	Goes with the flow. A “now” person who take things as they come, one day at a time.			
Connectedness	Has faith in the links between all things. Believes there are few coincidences; almost every event has a reason.			
Developer	Recognizes and cultivates others’ potential. Satisfied by spotting small improvements.			
Empathy	Senses other people’s feelings by imagining being in those people’s lives or situations.			
Harmony	Looks for consensus. Doesn’t enjoy conflict; rather, seeks areas of agreement.			
Inclusiveness	Accepting of others. Aware of those who feel left out; makes efforts to include them.			
Individualization	Intrigued by people’s unique qualities. Determines how they can work together productively.			
Positivity	Has contagious enthusiasm. Upbeat. Gets others excited about what they are going to do.			
Relator	Enjoys close relationships. Deeply satisfied by working hard with friends toward a goal.			



Reflection

How have you used these strengths in board service?

How have you used these strengths in your day job?

Start to understand your leadership team’s strengths (on your board, or at your day job):

1. Circle your own strengths above (if any in this category).
2. Think of three people on your board or leadership team you know well.
3. Guess at their strengths (don’t ask them, yet). In the numbered columns, make a check mark to indicate they definitely have that strength; make an X to indicate they definitely don’t; and use a question mark if you’re unsure.

Strategic Thinking: Keeps team focused on what <i>could be</i> . Absorbs, analyzes information to help make better decisions.		1	2	3
Analytical	Searches for reasons and causes. Thinks about all the factors that might affect a situation.			
Context	Enjoys thinking about the past. Understands the present by researching its history.			
Futuristic	Inspired by the future and what could be. Inspires others with her/his future vision.			
Ideation	Fascinated by ideas. Able to find connections between seemingly disparate phenomena.			
Input	Craves more knowledge. Likes to collect and archive all kinds of information.			
Intellection	Characterized by her or his intellectual activity. Introspective; appreciates intellectual discussions.			
Learner	Greatly desires learning, continuous improvement. Learning itself is what's exciting.			
Strategic	Creates alternative ways to proceed. Quickly spots relevant patterns, issues in a situation.			



Reflection

How have you used these strengths in board service?

How have you used these strengths in your day job?

Start to understand your leadership team's strengths (on your board, or at your day job):

1. Circle your own strengths above (if any in this category).
2. Think of three people on your board or leadership team you know well.
3. Guess at their strengths (don't ask them, yet). In the numbered columns, make a check mark to indicate they definitely have that strength; make an X to indicate they definitely don't; and use a question mark if you're unsure.

Going from Good to Great

When we focus on strengths, we can take our organizations from good to great in a Jim Collins sense. You remember:

- Right people on the bus.
- In the right seats.
- Wrong people off the bus.

When I say “good to great,” I mean Jim Collins’ observation from the already-classic book of the same name⁸ that successful organizations start with picking the right people. It’s about the mission, folks, and to succeed in the nonprofit sector we need the right people—people with applicable strengths—on the bus (in our organizations), in the right seats (leading the fulfillment of specific responsibilities with strengths best matched to the task).

A Strong Board Team

“ Although individuals need not be well-rounded, teams should be.

—Tom Rath and Barry Conchie, *Strengths-Based Leadership*

Board members lead their organizations from good to great not for the sake of improvement, but for the mission. A Teach for America alumnus had it right:

To simply be the best new teacher isn’t enough. Winning for the sake of students is the only option.

Think of strengths as the path of least resistance between you and the results you want to achieve—both for individuals and for leadership teams, which is what boards are. In a board leadership team setting, this simply means, for instance, that people who love the challenge of meeting new people and winning them over should focus on enhancing the organization’s public standing and selecting the chief executive. (Those are great matches for the “Woo” strength, as we’ll see in the upcoming “Matching Strengths to Board Responsibilities” chapter.)

⁸Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap ... And Others Don’t. Also see Collins’ Good to Great and the Social Sectors: A Monograph to Accompany Good to Great, which shows how some, but not all, of the Good to Great ideas apply to nonprofits.

No one board member is going to have all the qualities a board needs to fulfill its privileges and responsibilities and make big and lasting mission impact. As Tom Rath and Barry Conchie succinctly put it in their book *Strengths-Based Leadership*, “Although individuals need not be well-rounded, teams should be.”

We need strong leadership when we’re in it to win it—the mission impact we envision for ourselves, our families, our friends, and our communities. Instead of dwelling on our weaknesses (like the oft-bemoaned paucity of fundraising prowess), let’s focus on our strengths on the way to winning the future. Further, let’s not look to one Supermember with all the strengths; rather, let’s build well-rounded board leadership teams.

11. Matching Strengths to Board Responsibilities

Nonprofit board leadership is an unusual role in that you're part of a rather large leadership team. When we think of a nonprofit organization's leadership team, we may think of a small group consisting of perhaps the chief executive, the development director, and the program director. But the board is a leadership team of six or 10 or 16 or more.

This chapter presents some suggested matches for strengths and responsibilities and privileges. It's intended to inspire your own thinking about how you can form strong leadership teams using your colleagues' mix of strengths.

I'm not saying you should completely delegate any of the privileges and responsibilities to someone on your team who's especially strong. You are individually responsible for each. But there's no need to bang your head against a wall trying to do all 10 without support. That's what teams are for.

The quotation you saw earlier sums it up: "Although individuals need not be well-rounded, teams should be."

To help you, I'm going to highlight just one strength from each responsibility so you get a sense of the possibilities.

Strengths Matches for "Provide Strategic Leadership"

Remember that "Provide Strategic Leadership" means overall ...

- It's all about the mission.
- Your role as a board member is to move forward from the mission whenever possible and back to the mission whenever necessary.

... and that it summarizes these two responsibilities:

- Determine Mission and Purpose
- Ensure Effective Planning

Now, on to the matches.

Determine Mission and Purpose

This means you create and review a statement of mission and purpose that articulates the organization's goals, means and primary constituents served. One person you need on your team for fulfilling this responsibility is someone with the Command strength. This person has presence. She can take control of a situation and make decisions. She needs a strong personality to stand up for the mission amid the temptation for mission creep.

Determine mission and purpose			
Belief	Command	Communication	Futuristic
Believes the organization can make the world a better place.	Rejects off-mission initiatives.	Good thinking partner for the CEO.	Vividly sees a future where the world is changed.
Ideation	Input	Intellection	Strategic
Generates ideas for reaching the changed world envisioned.	Collects the world's best mission statements and adapts them.	Thinks deeply about the connections between mission and vision.	Envisions step-by-step how the mission achieves the vision.



Reflection

Which of these describes a contribution you can make? Underline it.

Which of these describes a need your organization has right now? Circle it.

Ensure Effective Planning

Next is ensure effective planning. This means actively participating in an overall planning process and helping implement and monitor the plan's goals. Here I'm going to challenge you to think of a weakness as a strength. I think we've all seen a colleague who's constantly bringing up the past. Well, we can sit there and stew about that, or we can reframe that in our minds as a strength. A person who thinks about the past has the Context strength. He enjoys thinking about the past and understands the present by researching its history. So let's call upon the person with the Context strength to know what's been tried before so we avoid reinventing the wheel, or repeating past mistakes.

Ensure effective planning			
Achiever	Adaptability	Context	Futuristic
Drives the planning process forward to completion, implementation.	Encourages board not to over-plan; only so much can be anticipated.	Knows what's been tried before; avoids reinventing the wheel.	Inspires the board to see thorough planning leads to achievement.
Ideation	Maximizer	Restorative	Self-Assurance
Quickly generates new ideas when the old ideas don't pan out.	Plans to take the organization from good to great.	Determines what went wrong with previous plans, resolves those issues.	Personal confidence in the plan inspires collective confidence.



Reflection

Which of these describes a contribution you can make? Underline it.

Which of these describes a need your organization has right now? Circle it.

Strengths Matches for “Ensure Abundant Resources”

Remember that overall “Ensure Abundant Resources” means ...

- Being on board financially in a personally meaningful way
- The human resources of a good CEO and a competent board
- The reputation resource you get from building your organization’s strong public standing

... and it summarizes these four responsibilities:

- Ensure abundant financial resources
- Select the chief executive
- Build a competent board
- Enhance the organization’s public standing

Now, on to the matches.

Ensure Abundant Financial Resources

First in this category is ensuring abundant financial resources for the organization to fulfill its mission. An Analytical person would be a good match to take the lead on this responsibility. She searches for reasons and causes and thinks about all the factors that might affect a situation.

Here you might use an Analytical person's strength for monitoring the financial statements. Or for serving on the audit committee. But why not also use her to analyze revenue-generating ideas? For example, one of my favorite nonprofits, MilkWorks, has its BabyWorks boutique—an extravaganza of earned-income excellence. Somebody has to write the business plans for the revenue-generating lines of business we should all be thinking about, given the really challenging fund development environment nonprofits face.

Ensure abundant financial resources			
Achiever	Activator	Adaptability	Analytical
Works hard at personal efforts to generate financial resources.	Gets a fundraising initiative moving quickly from plan to action.	Balances the analytical and cautious to try new things.	Analyzes the highest-ROI revenue generation measures.
Consistency	Discipline	Focus	Input
Adheres to the organization's business plan for sustainability.	Doesn't succumb to mission creep to generate revenue.	Keeps pursuing revenue-generation plan when the going gets tough.	Gathers new funding ideas.



Reflection

Which of these describes a contribution you can make? Underline it.

Which of these describes a need your organization has right now? Circle it.

Select the Chief Executive

Select the chief executive means reaching consensus on the chief executive's responsibilities and undertaking a careful search to find the most qualified individual for the position. A Developer recognizes and cultivates others' potential and is satisfied by spotting small improvements.

Did you know you need a development plan for your CEO? Don't just hire and forget. Your training budget may be tight, but you need to extract all the goodness you can, and a person with the Developer strength can do that.

There may be resources already available to you. For instance, NeighborWorks America offers the Achieving Excellence coaching program for community-development nonprofit CEOs, and any nonprofit leader can apply for the American Express Foundation - Aspen Institute Fellowship for Emerging Nonprofit Leaders. And, I'd be remiss in my parental responsibility to Ensure Abundant Food Resources for My Children if I didn't suggest individual executive coaching as a CEO development option.

You can and must find the financial resources to develop your CEO. Take a look at this quotation:

“ One of my concerns is the mindset we have in the nonprofit world that certain types of expenses can't be incurred unless someone else pays for them. Professional development ought to be a core part of every organization's operating budget, just like the phone system and health insurance.

— Rick Moyers, Meyer Foundation

Select the chief executive			
Arranger	Communication	Competition	Deliberative
Developer	Individualization	Relator	Self-Assurance
Seeks a candidate who can bring together the organization's diverse staff and stakeholders.	Describes to prospects exactly the desired mission impact.	Wants a great organization and sees the right CEO hire as key to winning.	A crucial decision requires lots of consideration.
No new CEO will be perfect; plans from the start to develop her/him.	Sees how the board's, CEO's, and staff's unique qualities work together.	Seeks a candidate with whom the executive committee can develop a close relationship.	Is confident this is the right choice.



Reflection

Which of these describes a contribution you can make? Underline it.

Which of these describes a need your organization has right now? Circle it.

Build a Competent Board

Next up is build a competent board. This means articulating prerequisites for candidates, orienting new members, and periodically and comprehensively evaluating your own performance.

I've been talking about forming strong board leadership teams, and I can't think of a stronger board team to foster diversity than one that puts people with Inclusiveness and Woo strengths on the nominating committee. The person with Inclusiveness will be able to make diversity concrete. A person with the Inclusiveness strength is accepting of others. He is aware of those who feel left out and he makes efforts to include them. Instead of just saying we need diversity so we can use more perspectives to make better decisions, the person with an Inclusiveness strength can identify specifically the voices that are missing, and then target those voices for recruitment to the board.

Then, a person with the Woo strength can reach out to people with those voices, and with a passion for the mission, and convince them they should spend their limited time, talent and treasure with the organization. A person with the Woo strength loves the challenge of meeting new people and winning them over. She breaks the ice and makes connections.

Build a competent board			
Arranger	Command	Connectedness	Harmony
Distributes the board's strengths in the most productive fashion.	A necessary quality for executive committee members.	Visualizes how the links between board members will foster results.	Fosters effective and efficient consensus decision making.
Individualization	Maximizer	Relator	Woo
Melds unique individuals into a unified whole.	Focuses on the board's strengths to make it excellent.	Builds close relationships among board members.	Attracts new board members and retains current ones.



Reflection

Which of these describes a contribution you can make? Underline it.

Which of these describes a need your organization has right now? Circle it.

Enhance the Organization's Public Standing

This means clearly articulating the organization's mission, accomplishments and goals to the public, and garnering support from the community.

A person with the Communication strength generally finds it easy to put thoughts into words. He is a good conversationalist and presenter. The board chair doesn't always have to be the spokesperson, though it should probably be someone on the executive committee. Remember that public support is a key resource you're responsible for having in abundance.

Enhance the organization's public standing			
Communication	Consistency	Harmony	Inclusiveness
Presents the organization's mission well to external stakeholders.	Keeps fairness toward all client segments top of mind; it's right, also good PR.	Presents the organization's work as a win-win, amid diverse views.	Ensures full and fair engagement of all external stakeholders.
Input	Learner	Positivity	Woo
Gathers external information on the organization's standing.	Looks for new public relations techniques for organizational image boosts.	Gets the public excited about the change the organization is making.	Reaches out to new people and wins them over.



Reflection

Which of these describes a contribution you can make? Underline it.

Which of these describes a need your organization has right now? Circle it.

Strengths Matches for “Provide Oversight”

Remember that overall “Provide Oversight” means you get to ...

- Monitor and strengthen the organization’s actual programs and services
- Ensure the organization stays above reproach legally and ethically
- Keep a close eye on the finances to guard the trust of all the donors, and likely taxpayers as well, who contributed to your organization.

... and that it summarizes four responsibilities:

- Monitor, and strengthen programs and services
- Ensure legal and ethical integrity
- Protect assets and provide proper financial oversight
- Support and evaluate the chief executive

Now, on to the matches.

Monitor, and Strengthen Programs and Services

When we monitor and strengthen programs and services, people with the Discipline and Empathy strengths can balance each other.

A person with Discipline enjoys routine and structure. She creates an ordered world. And she's a great choice for taking the lead on monitoring the organization's programs early and often to determine whether they're truly creating outcomes that further the mission.

Meanwhile, a person with Empathy senses other people's feelings by imagining being in those people's lives or situations. He is an important complement to the person leading the program monitoring effort. This is because he can imagine how challenging it is to work in the extraordinarily complex nonprofit sector with really constrained resources. And when a program's outcomes fall short, he can offer encouraging, rather than discouraging, feedback.

Monitor, and strengthen programs and services			
Activator	Analytical	Arranger	Competition
Wants program changes implemented quickly after evaluation.	Analyzes whether programs are creating mission impact.	Suggests rearranging programs so they complement each other.	Wants to be the best organization at achieving mission impact.
Discipline	Empathy	Restorative	Strategic
Creates a structured evaluation and improvement plan.	Understands the challenges program staff and clients face; is patient.	Can determine what's wrong with a program and suggest fixes.	Quickly suggests program adaptations as new opportunities merit.



Reflection

Which of these describes a contribution you can make? Underline it.

Which of these describes a need your organization has right now? Circle it.

Ensure Legal and Ethical Integrity

For ensure legal and ethical integrity, the Responsibility strength is an obvious choice. This person takes psychological ownership of personal commitments and is committed to stable values—in this case, the value of maintaining the public's trust by keeping the organization's every action above reproach.

Ensure legal and ethical integrity			
Belief	Command	Context	Deliberative
Represents an unwavering devotion to the public trust.	Takes rigid stand: "We will not do" illegal and unethical activities.	Reminds colleagues that the organization's strength rests on history of integrity.	Carefully considers actions so as to remain above reproach.
Discipline	Input	Intellection	Responsibility
Uses rules to automatically steer clear of illegal, unethical activities.	Keeps up to date on the latest legal and ethical requirements.	Enjoys detailed discussions about legal and ethical matters.	Strives for honesty, loyalty to the public trust in all actions.



Reflection

Which of these describes a contribution you can make? Underline it.

Which of these describes a need your organization has right now? Circle it.

Protect Assets, Provide Proper Financial Oversight

A good match for protecting assets and providing proper financial oversight is a person with the Deliberative strength. She takes serious care in making decisions or choices. She anticipates the obstacles. She asks a lot of questions.

Protect assets and provide proper financial oversight			
Achiever	Analytical	Communication	Deliberative
Analyzes the financials with vigor and stamina, month after month.	Spots positive and negative financial trends well in advance.	Helps fellow board members make informed financial decisions.	Takes serious care by asking lots of questions.
Discipline	Input	Responsibility	Significance
Creates, consistently implements strict financial controls.	Enjoys learning about new regulatory compliance issues and strategies.	Fosters honesty in all financial matters.	Loves the thrill, recognition of catching a financial error early before it causes damage.



Reflection

Which of these describes a contribution you can make? Underline it.

Which of these describes a need your organization has right now? Circle it.

Support and Evaluate the Chief Executive

Here I'm going to bring up Empathy again. We've already talked about developing the CEO and implicitly about evaluating her or his progress in the development plan you've made for him. So let's talk about support. I believe nonprofit CEO is one of the Top 5 most difficult jobs in the country. They operate under extraordinary resource constraints. They can't use money to attract the right team. They answer to a team of bosses that is constantly changing. I could go on, but I won't. Let me just encourage you to have empathy for your CEOs at the same time you regularly and comprehensively evaluate their performance against the standards you've set (and clearly communicated).

Support and evaluate the chief executive			
Communication	Consistency	Deliberative	Developer
Clearly relates desired outcomes to CEO; takes input from her/him.	Crafts and sticks to a rigorous, fair performance evaluation plan for CEO.	Carefully considers CEO performance in achieving mission impact.	Helps CEO go from good to great.
Empathy	Individualization	Learner	Relator
Understands social sector CEO is one of the hardest jobs anywhere.	Highlights the valuable contributions only the CEO can make.	Uses love of learning to inspire the CEO in her/his own development.	Fosters close supportive relationships between board members, CEO.



Reflection

Which of these describes a contribution you can make? Underline it.

Which of these describes a need your organization has right now? Circle it.

Worksheet: Matching Strengths to Board Responsibilities

- Following are 10 strengths matrices, one for each of the 10 responsibilities. Use these matrices to see patterns of abundant strength in your current board, and to see the need for recruiting new board members to fill in any gaps.



Instructions

For each of the following matrices:

1. Make check marks in columns 1-5 to record the *actual* strengths (from their StrengthsFinder assessments) of yourself and four other board members.
 2. Notice areas of abundance, and think of how you can build on those strengths to fulfill the responsibility with excellence.
 3. Where there are strengths gaps, fill in columns A-E with your *guesses* at the strengths of prospective board members you can recruit.

Ensure effective planning

Ensure abundant financial resources

Select the chief executive

Build a competent board

Ensure legal and ethical integrity

Ensure effective planning

Support and evaluate the chief executive

12. Conclusion: Leading with Strengths on a Nonprofit Board

In this part I introduced strengths psychology, which is the idea that you're better off developing your strengths than struggling against your weaknesses. Then I provided a blueprint I've created for matching strengths to responsibilities. These were strengths I've found in my experience and study are especially well suited to performing these responsibilities.

Before we leave Part III, remember: Complete the Action Plan for Part III. Don't make this just theory, or a nice learning experience. Do something with what you've learned.

The next part is ... there is no next part! But there is one more chapter, "Next Steps." You really should read it, because, remember, this book is all about taking action.

Further Reading

Strengths-Based Leadership: Great Leaders, Teams, and Why People Follow by Tom Rath and Barry Conchie (Gallup Press, 2009).

“[T]he book identifies three keys to being a more effective leader: knowing your strengths and investing in others’ strengths, getting people with the right strengths on your team, and understanding and meeting the four basic needs of those who look to you for leadership.”

The Source: Twelve Principles of Governance That Power Exceptional Boards (BoardSource, 2005)

“The Source: Twelve Principles of Governance That Power Exceptional Boards defines governance not as dry, obligatory compliance, but as a creative and collaborative process that supports chief executives, engages board members, and furthers the causes they all serve.

“The Source enables nonprofit boards to operate at the highest and best use of their collective capacity. Aspirational in nature, these principles offer chief executives a description of an empowered board that is a strategic asset to be leveraged. They provide board members with a vision of what is possible and a way to add lasting value to the organizations they lead.”

13. Action Plan: Leading with Strengths on a Nonprofit Board



Your Envisioned Future: When you've successfully built strengths-based leadership teams on your board, what will these people and things look like? How will they have changed?

You ~ The nonprofit organization ~ Your career ~ The world

Your Purpose Statement: Why do you want to achieve this future?

Your Current Reality: What's your current reality? What are the gaps between today and your envisioned future?

Specific Action Commitments: What will you commit to doing to create your envisioned future?

Action Partner: To whom will you be accountable to take action? When will she/he call you to check on your progress?

14. Next Steps

Want to take your board from good to great in fulfilling its 10 responsibilities and privileges, and on the way create big and lasting mission impact? Here's good news: You've already got Build a Competent Board (the most important one!) well underway because you've learned a strengths-based approach you can use to get the right people on the bus, in the right seats. Now take these steps:

Read

Mission Statement

Read your own mission statement and memorize it. If that's difficult, why then you know you have a problem.

“Use Strengths to Build a Great Board”

Read the box at the end of this chapter. (Talk about a quickly implementable suggestion! You're welcome.)

Funding Models

Read “Ten Nonprofit Funding Models” by William Landes Foster, Peter Kim, and Barbara Christiansen in *Stanford Social Innovation Review*.

Summary: “For-profit executives use business models—such as ‘low-cost provider’ or ‘the razor and the razor blade’—as a shorthand way to describe and understand the way companies are built and sustained. Nonprofit executives, to their detriment, are not as explicit about their funding models and have not had an equivalent lexicon—until now.”

My take: I attended a seminar Peter Kim gave at Stanford on funding models. He convinced me this is indisputably part of the toolkit nonprofit leaders need to think and talk creatively and effectively about resources. When you've thought in depth about your funding model, you will have gone a long way toward ensuring abundance.

Sustainable business planning

Read *Nonprofit Sustainability: Making Strategic Decisions for Financial Viability* by Jeanne Bell, Jan Masaoka, and Steve Zimmerman (Jossey-Bass, 2010).

This book introduces the matrix map, which lets you plot both your programs and your revenue sources on one four-quadrant chart so you can see which are stars (high profit, high impact), hearts (low profit, high impact), money trees (high profit, low impact), and stop signs (low profit, low impact). It's fantastically useful, and it's co-written by the heroic and humorous Jan Masaoka. What's not to love?

Consider

Resignation

Do you have what it takes to meet the 10 responsibilities and privileges of a board member? If not, consider going off the board for now. **Resignation is a key development tool for boards.** It's about the mission, not about you. You can always step into a volunteer role that comes with many opportunities to create impact, but doesn't carry the formal responsibilities and privileges of a board member.

Earned Revenue

Nonprofit organizations across the country are addressing the perennial problem of declining government revenue streams by generating earned revenue—that is, providing valuable products and services the purchasers and recipients can and will pay for. You're creating value. Think hard about who, besides the usual foundation, donor and government suspects, can and will cover at least a portion of your costs. (Hint: Reading the funding models article recommended above will help a lot.)

Act!

Improve your board's performance on the 10 responsibilities

Devote time in 10 board meetings to working as a board on the 10 chapters in BoardSource's *Ten Basic Responsibilities of Nonprofit Boards: The Companion Workbook* (BoardSource, 2012). Each chapter covers one of the 10 responsibilities (what I've called privileges) BoardSource lists for nonprofit boards. The workbook provides:

- Bullet points on the **core concepts** behind the responsibility.

- **Questions** to answer in taking your board from good to great.
- **Group activities** that can easily be dropped in any 15-minute agenda slot.
- A case study with discussion questions that would make for a great 30-minute **strategic thinking slot** on your next board meeting agenda.

Funding model

Devote a strategic thinking agenda slot to discussing your organization's funding model.

Donate treasure, not just time and talent

Get on board financially with a personally meaningful contribution. If you're spread too thin because you support a lot of charities ... why then you need to prioritize. You only have so much time, talent, and treasure, and you're not doing anyone—including yourself—any favors by spreading them around ineffectively.

Use Strengths to Build a Great Board

Recruitment

Look for prospective board members based on how their strengths match your needs for strong leaders in the 10 privileges. This will, of course, necessitate longer conversations with board prospects. That is entirely a good thing, given how hard it can be to get a bad member off a board. You know how advocates for early intervention in education and healthcare have rock-solid numbers showing a dollar spent now saves kajillions later? An hour spent now will do the same for your board.

Realignment

Your board may not now have the right combination of strengths to perform at a great level in all 10 responsibilities and privileges. Think about how allocating the strengths you do have, to yield great performance in a few targeted responsibilities and privileges, can secure big and lasting mission impact. You can do this even when resources are limited in the short term, knowing that early investments in board capacity will yield resources of effectiveness and money down the line. Remember to still allocate sufficient resources to other categories so you maintain the public's trust.

Committee assignment tool

Assign committee chairpersons based on their strengths, not just their willingness to do anything to help or (worse) one unlucky sap's absence from the meeting where committee chairs were assigned.

Strategic planning tool

Your board may not now have the right combination of strengths to perform at a great level in all 10 responsibilities. Think about how allocating the strengths you do have, to yield great performance in a few targeted responsibilities, can secure big and lasting mission impact. You can do this even when resources are limited in the short term, knowing that early investments in board capacity will yield resources of effectiveness and money down the line. Remember to still allocate sufficient resources to other categories so you maintain the public's trust.

Ensure effective planning

If you don't have compelling, well-organized board materials—why not? You set the expectations. So expect and get good materials.

But won't this take staff time away from programs? If it does, you need to give your chief executive the resources to hire more people.

Build a competent board

How much should you be investing in board capacity? Here's a simple calculation. Think of how many hours of your chief executive's time could be saved if she or he did not have to "manage up." (Don't think this hasn't happened with your board.) Take her or his salary, divide it by 2,000, then multiply the result by the managing up hours. There you have it: The absolute least you should be investing.

Build a competent board (Part Deux)

Do a BoardSource self assessment. Check first with any regional or national organizations of which you're a member to see whether they've bought the assessment for you already. Even if you have to pay full price, it's totally worth it. Remember, great organizations start with great people. You want to know you're great, not just assume it—right?

Support and evaluate the chief executive

Revise the chief executive's job description. You don't want a list of responsibilities; rather, you want outcomes you expect her/him to achieve. That is, mission-oriented changes in the world you expect to see. No one likes to be managed off a list—least of all C-level executives.

15. Action Plan: Pulling It All Together



Your Envisioned Future: When you've pulled it all together—you've advanced your career through nonprofit board service, understood nonprofit board leadership, and formed strengths-based leadership teams—what will these people and things look like? How will they have changed?

You ~ The nonprofit organization ~ Your career ~ The world

Your Purpose Statement: Why do you want to achieve this future?

Your Current Reality: What's your current reality? What are the gaps between today and your envisioned future?

Specific Action Commitments: What will you commit to doing to create your envisioned future?

Action Partner: To whom will you be accountable to take action? When will she/he call you to check on your progress?

About the Author

John M. Fulwider, Ph.D., helps nonprofit chief executives grow their organizations and solve problems. He specializes in executive coaching and training in these areas:

- Change management
- Strategic doing
- Communicating with impact
- Getting control of your time
- Engaging and mobilizing employees



Photo by Jenny Gegg

He's also a happy husband, a proud papa, a fun-loving foodie, and an advocate of alliteration. He is a sought-after speaker, especially on nonprofit executive, board, and staff development. He has written eight books, most of them about nonprofit chief executive leadership. Titles include *Encore Career Planning for Nonprofit CEOs*; *Nonprofit CEO Communication that Inspires, Aligns, and Influences*; *Maximizing Support from Your Board President for the Nonprofit CEO*; *Building High-Performing Nonprofit Leadership Teams*; and *90-Day Success Planning for the New Nonprofit CEO*.

John works primarily with community-development organizations and foundations, and those that mainly serve children. Some recent clients include alt.Consulting, Minnesota Philanthropy Partners, NeighborWorks Lincoln, NeighborWorks America, and West Central Initiative.

John's clients have included:

Child-Focused: Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Midlands, Child Advocacy Center, Hope Center for Kids

Economic Development: alt.Consulting, Center for Rural Entrepreneurship, Goodwill Industries

Foundations: Heartland Council of Community Foundations, Kearney Area Community Foundation, Nebraska Community Foundation, West Central Initiative

Health Care: Brain Injury Association of Kansas and Greater Kansas City, Brain Injury Association of Nebraska, Bryan Health

Housing and Community Development: Lincoln/Lancaster County Habitat for Humanity, NeighborWorks America, NeighborWorks Lincoln

Higher Education: South Dakota State University, University of Nebraska Public Policy Center

Other: Human Services Federation, KZUM 89.3 FM, Lincoln American Marketing Association, Lincoln Arts Council, Lincoln's Young Professionals Group

John has lived and traveled all over the world. He is a passionate foodie who can suggest what to eat, and where, in an impressive number of cities. While he charges a lot for his other services, his advice on eating out is always free.

John received all three of his degrees at the University of Nebraska and has no plans to ever leave Lincoln.

Five things you might not otherwise know about John:

- His favorite cuisines are Ethiopian, German, and Indian, in that order.
- He once completed a five-rappel descent off Cat in the Hat in the dark, without a headlamp.
- He's a redhead whose hair has gone dark. (Sad.)
- He still has the rock he used to (slowly) chip ice out of the wheel wells (all four!) of his Geo Metro one particularly wintry day in Boulder, Colorado, circa 1996.
- He adores functional public transportation systems with an abiding passion.

Contact Me

 @johnmfulwider

 john@johnfulwider.com

 402.608.1608

 johnfulwider

 [linkedin.com/in/johnfulwider](https://www.linkedin.com/in/johnfulwider)

 800 P St. #300, Lincoln, NE 68508