

Is Your Board Ready for Self Assessment?

A guide for non-profit leaders

By Jeff Wahlstrom



About This Publication

This document is a guide for non-profit leaders who are considering whether to undertake a formal board self-assessment. It was developed by Jeff Wahlstrom, of Starboard Leadership Consulting, and marketed through the Maine Association of Nonprofits.

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About Starboard Leadership Consulting, LLC

Serving nonprofit and municipal leaders, chief executives, and family owned businesses, Starboard Leadership Consulting, LLC, provides board performance, governance, and strategic planning advice, as well as leadership development, transition and succession planning, and management support services. At Starboard, we share a passion for helping organizations and family businesses excel. Drawing on our own resources and our many connections with experts in related disciplines, we bring a depth of experience that allows us to design and implement strategies for the many challenges faced by our clients. Starboard Leadership Consulting is an affiliate of Rudman & Winchell Counselors at Law in Bangor, Maine.

Additional Resources

You will find a wealth of resources, useful tools, and information about nonprofit governance best practices on the Maine Association of Nonprofits website: www.nonprofitmaine.org or by calling them at (207) 871-1875. While most of their services and resources can be accessed for free, we encourage you to consider becoming a member of the Maine Association of Nonprofits in order to fully benefit from the array of services available.

To Purchase a Copy

To purchase a copy of Starboard Leadership Consulting's on-line Board Self-Assessment tool, go to the Maine Association of Nonprofits' website, www.nonprofitmaine.org, and use the "Services" tab to navigate to the assessment tools.

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Is Your Board Ready for Self-Assessment?

Introduction

Almost any recent compilation of board best practices will list board self-assessment as something today's boards should commit to on a periodic, if not annual, basis. But why?

There is little argument that the strongest organizations almost always have the strongest boards. Strength is not always defined as having a “who's who” board made-up of wealthy and influential individuals. After all, some of those “who's who” boards have been at the helm of nonprofits that have experienced pretty spectacular and well publicized meltdowns. The reality is that it is not so much *who* is on the board but *how* the board operates.

The best boards are always asking, “How can we do this even better?” If, in response to that question, the board only looks at the staff and at programs, it is missing an essential element and the organizational component over which they have the most control. In the same way that the board might ask staff to develop objectives and measurements for programs for which they are responsible, the board should consider setting objectives for its own performance. Board self-assessment is a logical component of this work and a great place to start.

This guide offers, and is built upon, several years of experience in developing, administering, and interpreting board self-assessments. While we will reference the on-line board self-assessment tool that we first developed in 2005, it is our sincere hope that this guide will be of help to you no matter what kind of self-assessment process or tool you might be considering.

We often say that the real power of any board self-assessment tool is the conversation it begins—a conversation among board members that starts by asking, “How can we do this better?” We are glad that you are ready to begin that conversation, and we hope that this guide will be of help.

What Is a Board Self-Assessment?

When we talk about “board self-assessment,” we are talking about (as the name suggests) the board assessing itself. It is not a performance evaluation of the executive director, the organization, or even individual board members. Rather, it is an opportunity for the board to look at itself and ask, “How are *we* doing as a board?”

While this guide will focus on the use of the assessment tool developed by Starboard Leadership Consulting, we will be the first to suggest that there is nothing magic about the self-assessment tool we or others use. Whether you use an on-line instrument or a paper survey, purchase an existing product or make-up your own, board members will be asked to review a list of core responsibilities and best practices and indicate how well they think the board is doing in achieving them. The results are always illuminating, but they usually result in more questions than answers. The magic, if we can call it that, comes in the discussion and the process that follows.

Board self-assessment needs to be regarded as a *process* and not a one-time activity or as simply the completion and tabulation of a survey. Consider the administration of the self-assessment tool as the starting point in a journey that the board embarks upon together—a journey towards the development of a “board governance agenda.”

Think of the board governance agenda as a governance “to do” list for the board. Just like your “to do” list at work or at home, as soon as you cross off one item, you are likely to add

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one or two more items to the bottom. A board governance “to do” list, or agenda, is much the same. While there are some quick fixes, like, “Start putting the mission statement on the top of each board agenda,” nurturing and strengthening a board is an ongoing process. Even boards operating at the highest levels are always fine-tuning their recruitment process, identifying new topics for board education, and reviewing meeting evaluations to learn what they can do better.

In short, the board self-assessment process is a failure if it results in a new “to do” list for the executive director or is viewed as an interesting activity to fill time at the annual board retreat. Its value comes when the tool leads to a healthy and productive discussion about the board’s strengths and weaknesses and results in an agreed upon plan for building a stronger board and governance model.

What Board Self-Assessment Can and Cannot Do

It was noted earlier that board self-assessment is *not* a one-time, quick fix activity, and it makes sense to go into it clearly understanding what it can do for you and what it cannot:

Can

- Tell you how the board *thinks* it is doing at this particular point in time.
- Provide a summary of responses that can serve as a baseline from which to work in your governance improvement efforts.
- Help you begin the essential conversation with your board about its strengths and weaknesses.
- Provide a format for discussing some ongoing issues and concerns (term limits, lack of board support for fundraising, recruitment, etc.).
- Serve as a launching pad for an ongoing governance committee, the development of a governance agenda, and a continuing effort to strengthen your board.

Cannot

- Take the place of an organizational assessment or serve as a vehicle to evaluate the work of the executive director.
- Solve your problems with that “difficult” board member.
- Miraculously transform the board overnight.

It is worth noting that almost all of us learned how to be board members and how boards work by serving on a board. We didn’t take a course or get training. We went to meetings, and those meetings, and those boards, became our models for how boards work. Unfortunately, our models were often faulty at best and downright dysfunctional at worst. As a result, how board members respond to the questions posed as part of board self-assessment can be colored by what they have experienced to date and not by accepted best practices.

Be sure to use the board self-assessment process to highlight and explore the best practices that are being employed by other boards. You may need the assistance of a capable board member or an outside consultant to help make the case for adopting these practices, but you can be certain that the end result will be well worth the effort.

Are You and Your Organization Ready?

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Not every organization or every board is ready for the board self-assessment process. For instance, it probably doesn't make sense to embark on this process if the organization is facing a crisis or some other pressing matter that is requiring everyone's full attention. Nor should you launch this process when staff and board leadership are at odds with one another or when the organization or the board lack the capacity to enact the strategies they might develop.

While it is easy to build a long list of reasons for NOT initiating a board self-assessment process, the reality is that if you have staff and board leadership who are determined to strengthen the board, anything is possible, and good results are probable.

Here are some questions to ask yourself as you consider your organization's readiness for board self-assessment:

- Are the staff and board leadership ready to commit to the process and see it through? The greatest chance of success and lasting results come when the board chair (or vice chair) and the executive director are of one mind in this regard. A lack of commitment by either can doom this process and just waste time.
- Are you anticipating or going through a board leadership transition? This can be an ideal time for the soon-to-be or new chair to set his or her leadership agenda for the board.
- Are you anticipating or going through a staff leadership transition? Consider asking the board this question: "What do we need to do in order to be the board our new leader needs us to be?" We've worked with several organizations that have wanted to signal to executive director candidates that they are serious about building board capacity and have seen the board self-assessment as a means of doing that.
- Has it been a few years since the last board self-assessment process? While many organizations have not done a board self-assessment process before, there are others that do some level of assessment annually. It may make sense to undergo this process every 2-3 years, or, perhaps, as board leadership turns over.
- Do you have a governance committee already in place? Like board self-assessment, a standing governance committee that is responsible for board development, recruitment, and the general health of the board has become an accepted best practice. The board self-assessment will help to guide this committee's work and will get them focused on more than just the annual recruitment process.
- Do you have board members who you can recruit to see this process through? If you don't have a governance committee in place, do you have at least two or three board members who will be champions for the development and enactment of a board governance agenda?
- Can you link this work to the strategic planning process? Unfortunately, too often the strategic planning process results in an enormous "to do" list for the staff, and the board walks away without specific tasks. The board self-assessment process not only gives them some work to own, but it can also help to point out their role in moving the strategic plan forward (taking an active role in resource development, for example).
- Are you ready to commit the time? As noted earlier, this is not as simple as filling out a survey and simply reviewing the results. Board members need to be ready to commit

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to a retreat and an ongoing process. Don't underestimate the time involved, but don't let that stop you from doing some of the most important and valuable work you can do!

One note about timing: we are often asked whether it makes sense to start this process when new board members have just come on board or whether you should wait until they've had time to get to know the organization and the board. The fact is that board members come and go, and while it would not make sense to have a brand new board member fill-out a self-assessment survey as his or her first official board duty, the first impressions of new board members can be extremely valuable. We find the "unsure" responses to be as enlightening as any others. If you wait for the *perfect* moment, you will never begin this work.

Getting Everyone On Board

It is impossible to overstate the importance of securing a shared commitment to the board self-assessment process by the board chair (or incoming chair) and the executive director. Ideally, this should feel like a team effort, as real governance change or improvement is not possible if one or the other is a half-hearted participant or even resistant.

We typically recommend that the leadership team recruit a couple of other board members to play an active role in the process and take some ownership for seeing the assessment results translated into a governance agenda. These board members might become the core of an ongoing governance committee, even if it begins in an ad hoc manner.

"But what do I do if I am ready to embark upon this work but others are not?" Whether real or perceived, it is not uncommon to feel like you are the only one who "gets it." The reality is that you probably aren't alone. Others know that the board is not performing at the level that it should, but they don't know how to articulate that or what options to suggest.

If you are observing any of the following, you can be certain there are others who will welcome a discussion about improving board performance:

- Are you having trouble with attendance and achieving a quorum?
- Are board members *choosing* to attend other meetings over yours?
- Are board members coming to meetings without doing the necessary reading or preparation in advance?
- Are board members more active in "parking lot discussions" *after* meetings than they are during your meetings?
- Are board members coming to meetings late or always finding a reason to leave early?
- Are you experiencing a disturbing amount of micromanagement by the board?
- Do you hear repeated grumbling about the need for new board members?

Look around the board room and consider who might give you an honest response to this question: "On a scale of 1-10, what would be your hard-nosed assessment of the effectiveness of this board?"

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Ask the question. The number he or she gives you in response is not as important as the conversation it begins. It is very likely that you'll hear some frustration that may surprise you.

Even with this knowledge, it isn't always easy to begin the conversation with board or staff leadership who may see a discussion about board effectiveness as threatening or as suggesting that they are not doing their jobs well. Here are a few strategies for starting the conversation:

- Start sharing information about board best practices and high-performing boards with your board leadership.
- Share this guide and suggest, "Here's something we might want to consider."
- Approach this as a way to get the board on board with their fundraising responsibilities. Board self-assessment is a great way to begin this conversation.
- Using an evaluation form that is similar to what you would fill out at the end of a workshop, develop a short and easy form to assess your meetings. Review the results with the board chair or executive committee.
- Think of someone your board would consider to be a highly desirable board member and then ask this question, "If we were going to ask _____ to join our board, and she said, 'yes,' would she see us as a board that has its act together?"
- Do you have a new board recruitment effort underway? A strategic planning process that is about to begin? A leadership transition? An upcoming fundraising campaign? An accreditation visit or a grant renewal? These kinds of events are a great opportunity to ask, "Is this a good time for us to take a look at our board and how we operate?"
- If you can't get interest the first time, keep trying, or move on to other board volunteers. The incoming chair or vice chair should have a real stake in this work.

What the Board Will Be Asked

Whether you use Starboard Leadership Consulting's on-line tool (available through the Maine Association of Nonprofits), purchase another tool, or design your own, you can anticipate that each board member will be asked to consider his/her level of agreement with a series of statements that cover the core responsibilities of board members. The following are examples of the kinds of statements board members will be asked to place on a scale that ranges from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree":

- Our board has a constructive partnership with the chief executive that is built on trust, candor, respect and honest communication.
- Our board members share a compelling vision for the organization's future.
- During our meetings and in our work together, we allocate an appropriate amount of time to the issues and strategic priorities that matter most.
- Our meetings provide opportunities for constructive, respectful debate of issues.
- Board members put the interests of the organization above all else in making decisions.

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- Our board members give and/or raise funds to help us achieve our identified priorities.
- Our board promotes the highest ethical values and ensures appropriate oversight and accountability.
- Our board is results oriented and evaluates the performance of major programs and services.

In a thorough self-assessment process, board members will respond to as many as a dozen statements under headings like “finance,” “fundraising,” “board recruitment,” or “strategic direction.” When the responses are compiled, the areas of agreement among board members are just as revealing as those items with a broad range of responses.

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The Process – Step by Step

If you have determined that your board is ready to embark on the board self-assessment process, here are the steps that you can anticipate if you use an on-line self-assessment tool:

1. **Determine who will own the results** – It is essential to know up-front who will be charged with leading the effort and moving the board agenda forward. Find and recruit the champions and make sure they are clear on their ongoing responsibility for this effort.
2. **Make sure that the full board is on board** – Be sure that all board members understand why you are doing this work and what you hope to have as an outcome. In most cases, it is highly advantageous to get the board's commitment to participate in a retreat that will review the results and develop next steps.
3. **Administer the survey** – Send a compelling e-mail message to the board along with a link to the on-line self-assessment. Set a deadline and then plan to prompt, cajole, and nag to get full participation.
4. **Review the results** – Look for the obvious issues, note where there is a significant difference in how board members responded to specific items, and consider the comments. Most organizations find it helpful to work with a consultant who can assist in interpreting the results and provide information as to how the responses compare to those of other organizations.
5. **Provide the board with results** – In advance of a board retreat, share the results with the entire board.
6. **Hold a board retreat** – It is enormously helpful to have the board conduct its own section-by-section analysis of the results. The board members' perceptions of the issues and problems are most important. Having a neutral facilitator or consultant lead them through this process is highly recommended.
7. **Develop a governance agenda** – Often started during the retreat, it is essential to talk about the next steps and how to move this work forward. Having a clear "to do" list for the board is a must!
8. **Activate your governance committee** – Whether you have a formal committee or not, the champions you recruited (see step #1) need to set a meeting schedule and begin moving forward on the governance agenda.
9. **Keep it alive** – So many other things can get in the way of this work. Set a monthly schedule of meetings to keep moving on the governance agenda and don't ever cancel those meetings. This work should be ongoing.

Frequently Asked Questions

Is a retreat required? Our board doesn't like retreats.

We find that it is always best to engage the entire board in considering the results and talking about strategies. With capable facilitation, this work can often be done successfully in 4 hours, so a full-day retreat may not be required. An alternative is to provide the board with an overview of the results and then go into much greater detail with the governance committee or executive committee. This is not as desirable, however.

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What if some board members don't complete the self-assessment?

If you have a healthy majority of the board, don't let this discourage or distract you. Getting full, or almost full, participation in the retreat is more important.

We don't have a governance committee. Can the executive committee do this?

The executive committee will always be distracted by other events and activities. Even a small governance committee of 2-3 people who are focused on this work will be better.

Is this something we can do on our own, or do we need a consultant?

You are likely to find it helpful to have someone look at the results with you and facilitate the retreat, if nothing else. A facilitator or consultant can ask questions and probe for responses where a board or staff member might feel uncomfortable. Also consider whether you may need assistance in providing expertise or facilitation to the governance committee. Keeping the work moving forward sometimes requires the regimen that a consultant can provide.

How do we ensure that the board chair or executive director won't take the results personally?

While the self-assessment is about the work of the board as a whole, it is possible that organizational leaders can review the results and feel like they are personally responsible for any low scores or negative comments. Leaders who embark upon this kind of effort deserve enormous praise for beginning the conversation and constant reminders that, "this is not about you...it is about *us* as a board."

This may be too big of an undertaking for our board and our organization at this moment. Any thoughts on making it manageable?

Those organizations that don't appear to have the capacity, board interest, or time to start this work are usually the ones who most desperately *need* to get started. If you need to build board capacity and you have been looking for the right catalyst, the board self-assessment process can be just what is required. Often there is an urgent need for new and capable board members, but it is hard to attract the board members you need if your board is not functioning at a pretty high level. In this "chicken and egg" dilemma, we encourage you to start with board self-assessment, develop a board governance agenda, take some corrective actions, and then begin your recruitment process.

Final Thoughts

Volunteer board members deserve to have engaging and rewarding volunteer experiences. Nonprofits deserve to have the leadership and support of a board that brings their best to every meeting and to the organization. The board self-assessment process is a great way to see whether your board and your organization are meeting these mutual goals. Remember, however, that providing your board with a board self-assessment tool to fill out is just the starting point. This is a long journey that should proceed at a steady pace. Ideally, every step along the way will result in a stronger board and a stronger organization.

Congratulations on starting the journey. Please tell us about what you learn along the way so that we can share it with others, and don't hesitate to contact Starboard Leadership Consulting with your questions or comments. Send your e-mail to Jeff Wahlstrom at cjw@starboardleadership.com. We look forward to hearing from you!