Articles

Strengthening Board Performance
Findings and Lessons from Demonstration Projects

Thomas P. Holland, Douglas K. Jackson

Many nonprofit boards have undertaken board development activities, yet there has been little empirical evidence of the impact on board performance. This article reports findings from a three-year study of the boards of twenty-four diverse nonprofit organizations: ten participated in developmental interventions, and fourteen received no interventions but served as matched comparisons. The experimental group showed significant improvements in board performance, and the comparison group did not. Lessons from the study include a number of practical steps boards can take to reorganize governance procedures and structures to enhance board effectiveness.

The governing boards of nonprofit organizations are groups to whom the community entrusts power and resources so they can act as fiduciaries and guide their organizations with caring, skill, and integrity. In order to carry out their duties effectively, boards require a range of competencies in governance, especially skills in planning for the future of the organization, formulating strategic goals and policies to guide movement toward those goals, and monitoring organizational performance (Carver, 1990; Houle, 1989; O’Connell, 1985). Unfortunately, many board members have

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limited preparation for such demands. They bring altruism, business and professional skills, and concern for the issues addressed by the organization. Few, however, are well prepared for the challenges of translating values into clear statements of mission and goals, shaping the organizations’ future directions, setting priorities, working together as a team, and monitoring and assessing organizational performance. As a result, scarce resources may be consumed inefficiently and needs served ineffectively (Bradshaw, Murray, and Wolpin, 1992; Green and Griesinger, 1996; Herman, Renz, and Heimovics, 1997).

Strengthening the performance of boards in their governance responsibilities is widely assumed to be a key requisite for improving nonprofit organizations. However, few studies empirically document the impacts of efforts to improve board effectiveness. A recent survey of executives of Canadian nonprofits (Brudney and Murray, 1998) found that nearly three-quarters of them reported that their boards had undertaken some intentional efforts to improve board performance and many said those efforts had resulted in heightened board effectiveness. From their perspectives, board development efforts appeared worthwhile.

Although CEOs’ opinions are valuable, our own research has focused directly on the behaviors of nonprofit boards themselves. In previous reports, we summarized findings from analyses of the practices of boards identified by a panel of national experts on board development as reputedly either very effective or very ineffective, and similar analyses were conducted for boards of organizations that were widely divergent in financial well-being (Holland, Chait, and Taylor, 1989; Chait, Holland, and Taylor, 1993, 1996). The contrasts in behaviors between these sets of boards allowed our research team to isolate practices unique to effective boards. We identified six dimensions of board competency that seemed to capture the elements essential to effective governance:

We identified six dimensions of board competency that seemed to capture the elements essential to effective governance:

- **Contextual**: the board understands and takes into account the culture, values, mission, and norms of the organization it governs.
- **Educational**: the board takes the necessary steps to ensure that members are well informed about the organization, the professions working there, and the board’s own roles, responsibilities, and performance.
- **Interpersonal**: the board nurtures the development of its members as a group, attends to the board’s collective welfare, and fosters a sense of cohesiveness and teamwork.
- **Analytical**: the board recognizes complexities and subtleties in the issues it faces, and it draws upon multiple perspectives to dissect complex problems and to synthesize appropriate responses.
- **Political**: the board accepts that one of its primary responsibilities is to develop and maintain healthy two-way communications and positive relationships with key constituencies.
Having identified practices that characterize effective nonprofit boards, our team then sought to determine whether these practices could be used to structure a program of board development that would help boards from a variety of private nonprofit organizations improve board performance. The present article summarizes the findings from these board development demonstration projects and draws implications for future efforts to improve the work of nonprofit boards (Holland, 1996; Holland, Ritvo, and Kovner, 1997; Taylor, Chait, and Holland, 1996).

**Design and Measurement**

This study used a quasi-experimental, comparison group design to evaluate the impacts of interventions intended to strengthen the performance of participating boards. The sample consisted of ten boards that received a three-year developmental intervention and fourteen carefully matched sites that received no intervention but served as comparisons. Baseline data on board performance were gathered at each site prior to the interventions and again afterward, using structured interviews and a standardized, multidimensional measure of board performance in the six competencies, the Board Self-Assessment Questionnaire.

The Board Self-Assessment Questionnaire (BSAQ) has undergone extensive analyses of reliability and validity (Holland, 1991; Jackson and Holland, 1998). As summarized in Table 1, two different measures of internal consistency for each scale were high, indicating strong reliability. Factor analyses showed each scale to be composed of one dominant factor. The validity of the BSAQ was examined in relation to two external criteria, knowledgeable raters’ independent rankings of the boards and the organizations’ financial performance. The correlation between overall BSAQ scores and averages of the experts’ rankings indicated strong consistency between scores produced by the instrument and the external criteria. BSAQ scores also showed moderately strong and statistically significant correlations with each organization’s financial reserves and with composite scores of overall financial health. (Copies of the BSAQ are available from the senior author, along with scoring guidelines and average scores from over one hundred boards that have used the instrument in recent years.)

The boards participating in our field demonstration projects represented a variety of nonprofit organizations: small, private liberal arts colleges; community hospitals; and well-established social service agencies. All had highly educated and experienced professional staffs and board members. They were located in large cities all across the eastern half of the country. We believed that valuable and transferable
lessons would derive from working with such mainstream boards and that their diversity across domains would allow identification and comparative analyses of boards’ patterns of work and learning styles. We were interested in examining whether developmental efforts would result in measurable changes in board performance and whether responses to interventions would be different across the three types of organizations. In addition to board willingness to participate in the projects, criteria for selection into the sample were that the board was stable (for example, the CEO was not planning to leave), was not facing an extreme financial crisis, and was not locked in some deeply divisive battle.

We then identified matching comparison sites for intervention sites. Comparison sites for the private colleges were chosen on the basis of similarity to the experimental sites in size and on five indexes of financial performance (Dickmeyer, 1979; Dickmeyer and Hughes, 1987; Paskvan, 1982). An index of demographic and financial indicators similar to those for colleges was developed to guide selection of comparison sites for the hospitals. Comparison sites for the social service organizations were chosen on the basis of close similarity in mission, size, professional staffing, age, and annual budget.

The total sample was composed of fifteen colleges (six experimental sites and nine control sites), five social service agencies (two experimental and three control), and four hospitals (two experimental and two control). The BSAQ was distributed to these organizations’ 693 board members both before and after the intervention period. Seventy-six percent of the questionnaires were returned in usable form in the preintervention round (n = 526), and 62 percent were returned in the round of data collection that followed the conclusion of the interventions (n = 431).

Our major hypothesis was that the experimental group of boards would show significant increases in scores on the BSAQ scales but that the comparison sites would not. Because we had no clear basis for predicting directions of differences among the three categories of organizations, we posed a null hypothesis for that issue: board competency scores would not differ among the three organizational types—colleges, hospitals, and social service agencies: that is, the type of organization would not account for BSAQ scores.

Table 1. Two Measures of Internal Consistency on Six Scales Composing the Board Self-Assessment Questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contextual</th>
<th>Educational</th>
<th>Interpersonal</th>
<th>Analytical</th>
<th>Political</th>
<th>Strategic</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alpha</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theta</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>.86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Interventions

After the baseline phase of the project, members of our research team worked intensively with each board in the experimental group over a three-year period to strengthen its performance. We served in the various roles of coach, facilitator, consultant, teacher, and resource guide, as needed and requested by executives, board chairs, and committee chairs. This process got underway with an overnight retreat for each board, where our team presented the findings from the initial diagnostic assessments, including summaries of BSAQ scores and interview highlights, and then worked with the board to develop an action plan tailored for its development.

Consistent with a pattern that we had noted in earlier studies (Holland, 1991), baseline data suggested that weakness in the educational dimension was a common problem for most of the participating boards. Action plans emerging from the retreats addressed this dimension in various ways, with over two-thirds of the goals relating directly to educational issues. Because of this early emphasis, we expected that the greatest gains for experimental sites would be seen in their educational dimension scores.

During the early period of our work, we also noted that most board members seemed to be more comfortable addressing instrumental or task-oriented issues than they were with affective issues, such as group process, personal assumptions, or interpersonal relationships. Educational sessions, coaching, and feedback that related to the competencies of context or mission, setting goals and objectives, or formulating strategies were often received much more readily than were efforts having to do with interpersonal relationships or group processes. Many board members seemed to become uncomfortable when the discussion moved from instrumental tasks and objectives to group dynamics, relationships, underlying assumptions, group culture, learning styles, or conflicts among members. For this reason, we posited that the final data from the experimental sites would show higher gains in the contextual and strategic competencies than in the interpersonal competency.

Over the subsequent months, we regularly observed board and committee meetings, provided executives as well as board and committee chairpersons with oral and written feedback, suggested possible steps and resources for their consideration, and coached the board in the implementation steps of the action plan designed at the board retreat. Included in the activities undertaken by these boards were establishing priorities for meetings, developing orientation programs for new members and educational sessions for all, planning for leadership succession, monitoring and evaluating board performance, sharpening meeting agendas and use of time, clarifying the role of staff in working with the board and its committees, and communicating more extensively with constituencies.
In order to increase opportunities for peer-to-peer assistance and collaborative learning, we convened the chairpersons and executives from all the experimental sites for a summit meeting, held after all of them had conducted a retreat and established work on their action plans. These summit meeting discussions provided time for board leaders to review and assess their experiences in the project, to discuss governance issues, to exchange ideas and information on board education and development, and to refine their goals and plans for the remainder of the project period.

Project team members met regularly with boards in the experimental group over the three years. Toward the conclusion of this period, we assumed more of an observer role, providing guidance and suggestions only intermittently, as requested. This shift in roles was consistent with the goal of encouraging board self-sufficiency. Postintervention data from interviews and BSAQs were gathered, and each site’s results were reported back to its board.

Findings
The results of data analyses provided support for each of the hypotheses. As shown in Table 2, the experimental sites showed statistically significant gains in every board competency but one, whereas the comparison sites showed significant change in only one dimension and some deterioration in another. Significance levels express the probability that changes in scores can be attributed to chance, and the effect size statistics express the magnitude of those changes. The overall change in the experimental group was large.

Table 2. Pre- and Postintervention Differences for Experimental and Comparison Boards

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Pre/Post Difference</th>
<th>t Value</th>
<th>Degrees of Freedom</th>
<th>Effect Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>Contextual</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>3.44&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>398</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Educational</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>9.40&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>381</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interpersonal</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>4.56&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Analytical</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>1.66</td>
<td>392</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Political</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>3.85&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>394</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strategic</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>5.84&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>402</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>7.07&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>398</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>Contextual</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>496</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Educational</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>496</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interpersonal</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td>530</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Analytical</td>
<td>−0.03</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>468</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Political</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>3.02&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>517</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strategic</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>534</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>527</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>p > .05  
<sup>b</sup>p > .001
whereas that for the comparison group was zero, indicating that the magnitudes of change in those boards receiving interventions were much larger than those in the other boards.

We next examined whether there were significant differences in the gains in scores between the experimental and comparison sites. Gains were computed using the average difference between pre- and postintervention scores on the BSAQ. Table 3 displays the results of these tests. The experimental group demonstrated significantly greater gains in overall scores and in three of the six dimensions than did the comparison group. Again, the magnitudes of most differences were large. When taken together these results make a persuasive case that notable improvements occurred in board performance in the experimental group that cannot reasonably be attributed to chance and that little or no change occurred in the comparison group.

The data in Tables 2 and 3 also supported our hypothesis that the greatest gains would be seen in the educational dimension. The effect size statistic in the experimental group’s educational dimension was markedly larger than the effect sizes for other dimensions, almost double the next largest effect size (for the strategic dimension).

From our experiences during the interventions, we had also predicted that the experimental boards would score significantly higher in the contextual and strategic dimensions than in the interpersonal one. This hypothesis was confirmed in that the composite average of scores in those two dimensions prior to intervention was significantly higher ($t = 25.8; df = 17; p < .0001$) than average scores in the

Table 3. Analysis of Covariance: Comparing Gains of Experimental and Comparison Groups (Controlling for Pre-Intervention Scores)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Mean Gain Adjusted for Pretest Scores</th>
<th>F Value</th>
<th>Degrees of Freedom</th>
<th>Effect Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contextual</td>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>0.068</td>
<td>8.42a</td>
<td>(1,22)</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational</td>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>0.213</td>
<td>15.8b</td>
<td>(1,22)</td>
<td>0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>0.045</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal</td>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>0.086</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td>(1,22)</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>0.031</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analytical</td>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>0.017</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>(1,22)</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>−0.012</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>0.064</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>(1,22)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>0.065</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic</td>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>0.122</td>
<td>5.9a</td>
<td>(1,22)</td>
<td>0.211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>0.033</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>0.100</td>
<td>9.85a</td>
<td>(1,22)</td>
<td>0.309</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>0.024</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05

*p < .01

These results make a persuasive case that notable improvements occurred in board performance in the experimental group that cannot reasonably be attributed to chance.
interpersonal dimension. A significant difference between these two measures remained at postintervention.

Finally, we had hypothesized that there would be no significant differences in the increases in scores across the three types of organizations—colleges, hospitals, and social service agencies. The data showed that the only difference among them was in the interpersonal dimension, where scores for hospitals showed somewhat smaller increases than those for the colleges. The score gains for social service agencies were between those of colleges and hospitals and not significantly different from either. All other dimensions and overall scores showed no significant differences among gains made by type of organization. In sum, boards from a wide variety of nonprofit organizations showed largely similar patterns of performance improvements.

Discussion of Findings
The results from these demonstration projects are quite encouraging. Boards engaged in developmental interventions showed significant improvements in most areas, whereas boards of comparison sites showed a pattern of little or no change. The largest increases in scores were seen in the area targeted for most attention. The framework of board competencies was useful in guiding board development efforts across a variety of types of organizations. The data indicated that diverse boards engaging in ongoing efforts to develop their skills can markedly improve their performance.

Caution should certainly be used in generalizing these results to the larger population of all nonprofit boards. This was not a true experimental study, as it did not use random assignment. Also our sample size was rather small, and it did not include nonprofit organizations that were smaller, out of the mainstream, or staffed mainly by volunteers. Furthermore our sample was composed of sites agreeing to participate in the projects, raising possibilities of self-selection biases and Hawthorne effects. Nevertheless, given the expense involved in multiyear developmental efforts such as were undertaken in these sites, it is unlikely that many large-sample, true experimental studies on governance will be conducted. Although it would be inappropriate to generalize cause and effect from our findings, they clearly support further efforts in conducting and studying board development.

Discussion of Lessons
Our work with the experimental sites suggests several conclusions about conditions necessary for board development to succeed and some practical steps for reorganizing governance procedures and structures to enhance performance. Obstacles to improving board performance include ambiguous expectations, weak accountability, lack
of clarity about what needs changing, biases from previous unsuccessful efforts at change, and discomforts from relinquishing familiar practices and trying new ones. Overcoming such barriers requires clear commitment from the CEO, the board chair, and a substantial number of members. Change cannot be imposed, and any board must accept the importance of purposive efforts to improve its own performance in order to begin work on change.

Board development is a long-term effort rather than some quick fix. Board members cannot learn to work together as an effective team during a single retreat or from a few readings. Such learning must be integrated into the board's regular business and become a part of members' ongoing work (Taylor, Chait, and Holland, 1996). We found that most members were motivated by a desire to contribute to improving their organization's performance, not the board's own functions, so changes should be framed in terms of enhancing the organization. Pressures to revert to business as usual may become overwhelming if continued attention is not given specifically to strengthening the ways the board adds value to the organization.

Our experience suggested several useful steps for tailoring development programs that overcome inertia and target attention upon important aspects of board performance. First of all, productive efforts to improve performance depend on sensitive assessments (Ashford, 1989). The combination of on-site interviews and BSAQ score profiles provided both depth and breadth of information with which to identify targets for attention. The challenge of obtaining information that reflected a balance of depth (information that is sufficiently detailed) with breadth (assessment that is inclusive of all members' views) was important not only for accurate diagnosis but also for establishing the legitimacy of change efforts with board members.

A second step for effective developmental efforts was to engage board members in formulating their own development program. Change is not a one-size-fits-all process. In our projects the product of the first retreat was an action plan created by the members themselves, drawing from group discussions of the information provided by the initial diagnostic assessments. The action plan, in effect, became the intervention that trustees formulated for themselves and that only they could assume responsibility for completing. Giving the board this responsibility had the added advantage of allowing project team members to exchange the role of expert or teacher for that of coach. Although there are many avenues for pursuing board development, we believe that effective interventions must be designed both to accurately reflect the realities facing a particular board and to require board members to accept responsibility for their own changes. Interventions that are weak in either of these aspects are unlikely to be effective.

It proved much easier to change a board's behavior than its members' attitudes or personalities. Exhortations or prescriptions did not work nearly as well as did changes in procedures and structures for
working together. Members began thinking and acting differently as a consequence of steps such as bringing more thoughtful questions to the table, seeking relevant and focused information on problems before them, breaking into small discussion groups to brainstorm alternative directions and formulate action recommendations, encouraging critical thinking about issues before the board, and getting feedback on board performance. The most useful steps linked process with substance: for example, asking the board to set goals for itself or to formulate indicators to monitor its own progress served to build group cohesion and educate participants as well as to generate substantive products.

The first retreats were powerful tools for initiating board development in the experimental sites. They allowed board members to devote extended time to reflecting together about the board's profile of scores on the six competencies and the implications for board performance. We then made use of their conclusions to focus them on designing approaches to working on their board's own major concerns. These concerns differed across boards and included such issues as developing or updating the organization's strategic plan (for those boards scoring low in the strategic competency), planning how the board would become better educated about the organization's external environment, and formulating criteria for monitoring board performance (for those boards scoring low in the educational competency). Reviewing the past year's efforts and identifying lessons to apply in the coming year were also very useful activities that contributed to participating boards' becoming more effective teams (Holland, 1997; Savage, 1994).

After these retreats, building board education and development right into each board's ongoing work was important for extending and sustaining improvements. As one participant observed, “We came to realize that we needed to take responsibility for continuing to expand our own knowledge and skills.” The boards involved their members in designing learning plans that would enable them to make greater contributions to the board. Participants reported that getting feedback periodically about their board's performance was another very important input for learning. Likewise, participants' assessments of plenary sessions and committee meetings provided ideas for changes that guided their efforts to improve subsequent meetings. They adapted and experimented with a range of practices from high-performing boards, especially in the educational and strategic areas.

A practical step for improving performance at several sites was restructuring the board's committees and use of meeting time so the board focused clearly on its strategic priorities. Rather than consume valuable time listening passively to committee reports, many board members began urging that meeting time and attention should be focused directly on the board's top priorities. A powerful early step at some sites was having a member simply monitor the amount of time the board spent on each issue at a meeting and rate each issue’s relevance to the board’s priorities.
time the board spent on each issue at a meeting and rate each issue’s relevance to the board’s priorities. Then the full board considered the relationship between its stated priorities and its actual use of time. Subsequent monitoring showed improvements in the match between time spent and the relative importance of topics addressed.

Board chairs experimented with ways to limit the meeting agenda to matters of most importance to the board. One useful practice was to cluster routine reports and nonexceptional matters that required board approval into a consent agenda; they could then be voted on in one action rather than separately. Background material on all items was sent out well in advance of meetings, and any member could request that an item be separated out for discussion, thus protecting the board’s right to examine any issue. This practice enabled the board to keep its time and attention focused on the few issues of greatest importance and avoid consuming time probing around in managers’ operational issues.

Another productive step to improvement was restructuring the board’s committees and the board’s charges to them. Most of the boards had committees that reflected the divisions in their organizations’ management, such as finances, programs, and personnel. Such structures invited wasteful analysis of operational details and second-guessing of organizational managers. Departing from this tradition, several boards decided to experiment with having form follow function: that is, they used the board’s strategic priorities as a framework for designing workgroups and assigning their tasks. These ad hoc groups focused members’ attention directly on each of the board’s goals, and a group went out of existence when its goal was reached. Instead of consuming meeting time with reports from every committee, the agenda focused upon only two or three high-priority issues at each meeting, with discussions led by those groups that had done the background preparation.

Although most boards were more comfortable with educational activities, structural changes, and steps to sharpen attention to strategic priorities than with work on interpersonal relationships or group processes, the most effective of them also extended their efforts to include careful steps to transform their assembly of talented individuals into a cohesive team (the interpersonal competency). Having individual members provide expertise and advice is useful, but developing strong teamwork enabled these boards to add even greater value to their organizations. This was a long and difficult process for some of the participating boards, requiring careful and sustained nurturing. A useful approach was to bring to the board the critical and basic issues facing the organization, not window-dressing issues but important, underlying problems that lay beyond the expertise of any single member. This approach also required taking the time necessary to hear the views of participants and find syntheses that pulled together the best of the whole board’s thinking. It required making sure that everyone had access to all relevant information. It required investing time in having members get to know one another outside
the formal setting of meetings. It required paying careful attention to communications and feedback among members, nurturing inclusive relationships, and building a sense of mutual ownership for the quality of the board’s work.

We found that engaging a board in formulating goals for the board itself not only contributed to group cohesion but produced a vital framework for subsequent board attention. Such goals were distinct from, but led to, the goals the board had for its organization. They specified what the board itself would do in order to maximize its contributions to the organization’s efforts to reach the overall goals. Boards that identified their own goals posted them in conspicuous places and repeated them in reports and discussions. Keeping them at the forefront of everyone’s attention sharpened the focus of discussions and ensured that time was used to further the board’s priorities. Participants reported that such steps helped them clarify their expectations of the board and of its individual members and also deepened their understanding of how behaviors contribute to goal attainment. Having a board set goals for itself and periodically review its progress toward them sustained board attention on its own performance and the ways the board added value to the organization. Agreement on such goals laid the groundwork for the board’s subsequent efforts to monitor its progress and evaluate its own performance.

**Conclusions**

The most effective boards in our demonstration projects learned to attend to how board members worked together as well as to what work the board did. Their members began taking responsibility for considering the ways the board carried out its work and for seeking new ways to improve performance. Rather than treating board development as something separate from regular board responsibilities, these boards came to see how well they did their work as a part of their ongoing responsibilities. These responsibilities now included taking time for reflection on how the board was using its time, particularly after dealing with a difficult issue, as well as conducting more extensive and formal steps of board education, performance evaluation, feedback, and planning.

The conceptual framework of six competencies was useful to project team members in assessing and analyzing aspects of board performance warranting attention and in offering suggestions about areas on which boards could work. At the outset of our efforts with the participating boards, most of their members were less interested in the abstract framework than in identifying and taking instrumental steps of change. Examples of effective practices in each competency provided these members an array of choices or possible actions from which they could select ones they might apply to current issues facing their boards. Most concentrated initially on the educational...
and strategic competencies. Only as they began to experience more focused, productive, and satisfying meetings were some participants ready to revisit the conceptual framework and consider practices they had overlooked before, such as those in the interpersonal dimension.

In conclusion, the findings from these projects provide evidence that boards of a variety of nonprofit organizations can take intentional steps that improve board effectiveness. Focused and sustained efforts to improve board performance can realize measurable gains. Such efforts take long-term work by a board; they involve moving members out of familiar territories and comfortable habits and supporting their experimentation with new ways of doing business. As one board member observed, “Just as our board members expect staff to show improvements in productivity and gains in impacts, so we should model the behavior we want from them.” Ongoing attention by a board to its own performance leads to a culture of active responsibility for continuous improvement in the quality of its work and greater satisfaction among members. It enables the board to improve its leadership of the organization and demonstrates to others inside and outside how the board expects value to be added to the organization.

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