



Board Lifecycle: Where Are You?

Management literature has long recognized that organizations, like other living things, experience distinct phases of growth and/or decline.

In times past, the organizational lifecycle pattered along slowly. Board members enjoyed lengthy tenures, and staff and volunteers typically stayed for the long haul. But, today, the lifecycle process has accelerated. Board members, staff and volunteers come and go more often, and organizations pass more rapidly through the different stages as they undergo continuous change.

Of course, this change has its own risks and opportunities, impacting vital areas such as:

- Fundraising
- Program success
- Perceived program effectiveness
- Organizational image
- Community impact
- Staff and volunteer morale

Stages Of Development

Knowing where your board is (and where it's headed) on the lifecycle continuum is critical. That knowledge can then be used to best utilize and guide your board. After all, you

wouldn't manage the board of a startup organization the same way you would a board of a seasoned nonprofit.

Infancy — Start-up Or Start-over

In its infancy, a board is often composed of the founders. Members tend to be the organization's service providers. There is usually little or no planning. Policy making and fundraising occur as needed, and evaluation focuses on the present.

Challenges:

- Defining roles, responsibilities and structure
- Maintaining board members' interest and passion for the mission
- Addressing long-term needs

Juvenile — Growth Period

In the juvenile stage, an organization typically acquires more staff to perform support work, but board members still focus on operations. During this stage, the board may begin to see the need for more formal systems and oversight, but it is often reluctant to make large-scale changes, particularly if the organization is experiencing some program success.

Challenges:

- Realizing that first-time hiring of staff does not make all the work go away
- Not taking on activities that exceed board and staff capabilities
- Balancing work and "play," such as celebrating successes, to avoid board-member burnout

Adolescence — Spurts Of Growth And Decline

During the adolescence stage, staff tends to be the driving force, taking on the bulk of service and support while the board struggles with a variety of changing roles. Greater attention is drawn to governance issues, fundraising, financial oversight or simply staying out of management's way.

Challenges:

- Struggles often lead to loss of dedicated and capable board and staff
- Busier executive director becomes less accessible to staff
- Developing formal policies and procedures to clarify the board's role
- First "outsiders" may be brought on to board

Maturity — Established

In the mature stage of a healthy organization, staff and board have formally established roles and responsibilities — and hold each other accountable to those roles. Both sides do what is necessary to meet the needs of the organization. But even in this mature stage, change is constant. When an organization does not change, despite the constant changes in its world, it becomes unhealthy.

Challenges:

- Not remaining static
- Larger, more culturally diverse and specialized staff and board may be required
- Fundraising becomes a more important role

The Bottom Line

Understanding the inherent behaviors and challenges that occur during each developmental stage is key to defining your board's roles and responsibilities — and ensuring they match your needs.

No matter what stage your board is in, our nonprofit advisors can help. Call on us to facilitate your board and planning processes.

Identify your board's development stage

Infant Juvenile Adolescent Mature

Responsibilities

Performs operational	X	X		
Oversees operations	X	X	X	

Oversees operations	X	X	X		
Develops policy and plans				X	X
Structure					
Committee of whole	X	X			
Executive committee only				X	X
Nominating committee	X	X			
Fundraising committee		X		X	X
Strategic planning committee				X	X
Composition					
Founder	X	X		X	
Founder's friends	X	X		X	
Executive's friends				X	X
Community members	X	X		X	
Business people				X	X
Representatives from funding sources					X