

Tips to Build Trust and Engagement With Your Board



By Emily Haynes

Nonprofit boards play a [crucial role](#) in ensuring organizations meet their missions, manage finances well, and make sound decisions on staffing and programming. But the challenges of recent years have often overshadowed traditional board governance responsibilities and have even sparked tensions in the boardroom.

“It’s not a fun time to be a board chair of many organizations, but it’s an absolutely critical time,” says Nick Grono, CEO of the Freedom Fund, an international anti-slavery nonprofit, and author of *How to Lead Nonprofits: Turning Purpose Into Impact to Change the World*.

The Chronicle spoke with experts on board relations to learn how best to foster engagement and collegiality among nonprofit trustees.

Start with effective onboarding.

A key ingredient for a curious and active board is an intentional onboarding process, says Matthew Heyer, lead adviser for board strategy, engagement, and relations at Save the Children US, a federation that includes Head Start education programs and Save the Children International, which works in 46 countries.

“There’s multiple pieces to our organization,” Heyer says. “That can feel overwhelming to a board member when they’re first joining.”

Heyer says his team works to give new trustees enough time to grasp the unique structure of Save the Children US and help new board members get to know the organization’s CEO, board chair, and other senior leaders.

Freedom Fund uses a similar strategy, and Grono says these meetings can be invaluable to new trustees. “It’s easy to share a lot of information, but that doesn’t really get you very far,” he says.

At Freedom Fund’s most recent board meeting, for example, a facilitator led the board — which included two new trustees — in a discussion about why they got involved with the organization and what expertise they bring to the boardroom.

“In line of my theory that the more cohesive the board is, the better it is, it’s a hugely important investment in time,” Grono says.

Save the Children US also employs a buddy system through which trustees joining the board are matched with a trustee who’s further along in their board term.

“If they have questions that they might not want to raise in a committee meeting because they’re just not confident enough, they can lean on that person to help them as they navigate their onboarding and as they join various committees,” Heyer says.

The beauty of the buddy system, Heyer adds, is that it doesn’t just support new trustees — it can also build connections among longer serving trustees who are mentors. “It helps them form a relationship with their fellow trustees ... and makes them feel good about their own journey as a trustee,” Heyer says.

Keep the board close to the mission.

One of the biggest challenges of board management is baked into its structure. “There’s often a huge [asymmetry of power](#) and knowledge between boards and CEOs,” says Grono.

While boards are charged with oversight of the budget and have the authority to hire and fire the executive, they often don’t have a knowledge of the inner workings of a nonprofit’s programs or mastery of every nuance of its mission. That expertise lies with the executive.

“Board members are volunteers, invariably, who might meet quarterly, so they have a fraction of the knowledge of the work — even if they’re expert — because they’re not involved in the day-to-day work, and I think that that can be problematic,” Grono says.

To counter this imbalance, create opportunities for trustees to interact with those who are delivering and participating in the nonprofit’s programs. Once a year, Grono takes his board to one of Freedom Fund’s program sites around the world. In 2025, the trustees traveled to Indonesia, and this year they’ll meet in Brazil.

But these mission moments need not be expensive. Grantees or clients could give a virtual presentation to the board, Grono suggests, or community-based organizations could take their board to local program sites.

“I’ve observed boards being much more effective when they are closer to the work,” says Mandy Sharp Eizinger, program manager at the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy. She says that interactions between trustees and a nonprofit’s clients function best when they feel authentic to both groups.

Encouraging trustees to volunteer with the nonprofit’s programs also drives the mission home. “It could be, if you are on the board of an education organization, that you also may be an after-school tutor,” Sharp Eizinger says. “Your relationship to the work is not just sitting around the boardroom table approving strategy and budgets but very human.”

Check in regularly and transparently.

Frequent communication between an executive and the board — especially the board chair — goes a long way, experts say. Grono says he meets with his board chair about every four to six weeks, but more frequently when there are pressing topics to discuss.

“If you are a really small nonprofit with an active volunteer board, you might be speaking weekly,” Grono says.

But he cautions that leaders need to be mindful of preserving their own autonomy as the executive of the organization. Before arranging a conversation with trustees, Grono says, leaders should always consider, “What is the purpose? What are you trying to achieve? What is the best means to achieve that?”

A key reason for regular communication is trust-building. To that end, leaders must be willing to share the good and the bad. When Grono’s nonprofit faces a challenge, such as a grantee mismanaging money, he will be sure to update the board on the issue — either in the papers trustees receive before meetings or verbally. “The more trust that you build,” Grono says, “then the more space the board is willing to give the executive.”

When communicating with board members, it can also be helpful to periodically check their pulse about their board service, Sharp Eizinger says. Be careful not to overwhelm trustees with too-frequent survey requests, she warns, but their feedback is valuable in keeping them engaged.

These assessments can include questions about whether trustees feel they are receiving the support they need from staff, whether they think meetings are happening too frequently or not often enough, and whether they feel adequately prepared before meetings.

Nonprofits should respond to this feedback, such as by preparing outlines when trustees say they receive more information than they can reasonably read before meetings.