

Board Manual: Essential Tool

by Suzanne M. Kearney, Executive Director

A board manual is an essential companion to orientation and education of board members. Every organization should have a thorough, easy-to-use manual that trustees/directors use through their terms.

A board manual has two purposes. First, it serves as an orientation handbook for new members. The contents should answer all basic questions about the organization, board structure and functions, fellow board members and staff. Second, the manual is an indispensable resource tool for all board members that contains key information they need to fulfill their major responsibilities for planning, direction-setting, evaluation, overseeing and decision-making.

The Board manual is ordinarily developed by the chief executive in consultation with the board chair and the board committee responsible for board orientation and development. The goal should be to create a vital and hard-working foundational “textbook” that continuously keeps the core elements of the organization, its current and trend performance, future goals and annual objectives at hand.

What Is In A Board Manual?

Most board manuals contain the following categories and items. You can use the list as a handy reference for compiling or updating your manual.

Charter Documents

- Brief history and fact sheet
- Articles of Incorporation
- IRS Determination Letter
- Other evidence of tax exemption
- Licenses and permits

Strategic Plan

- Mission, Vision and Value Statements
- Goals, Strategies and Objectives
- Action Planning (annual objectives, responsibilities, timelines)
- Status Reports toward implementation of the plan

Board Organization and Operations

- Bylaws
- Policies
- Organization chart
- Board committee charter and members
- Committee work plans (“to-do” list for each committee)
- List of board members and contact information
- Board calendar
- Recent board agenda and minutes
- Recent report from chief executive

Programs and Marketing

- Program descriptions and objectives
- Accreditation reports
- Marketing and development plan
- Positioning statement

Finance and Fundraising

- Annual budget
- Financial statements
- Financial analysis
- Recent audit report
- Fundraising plan
- Fundraising reports

Other

- Staff list and contact information
- Website information
- Promotional materials

Manuals differ somewhat, depending on the needs and nature of the organization. For instance, some of the above may be included in accompanying documents, such as board policy book, employee handbook, annual report and annual audit report. If the manual becomes too voluminous, it is no longer a useful resource book. Less useful materials can be placed in supplementary documents for occasional reference.

If board members have their manual at hand at board and committee meetings, you know it is fulfilling its purposes.

Tips for Compiling and Updating Your Board Manual

- Use a three-ring binder so entries can be inserted/removed easily.
- Include a content page & tab labels for quick reference.
- Date entries so you can ensure the latest version is included.
- Update the manual annually as part of the preparation for orientation of new members.
- Keep all text brief, concise, and clear.
- Seek input from board members regarding usefulness of the manual and its content.