

# Mentor Your Way to Board Development



LOIS J. ZACHARY  
President  
Leadership Development Services, LLC  
Phoenix, AZ

*Are you looking for a way to develop your board members' leadership abilities? A board mentoring program can have powerful results.*

Savvy nonprofit boards are following the lead of their private sector cousins and utilizing mentoring as a means for orienting new members, promoting individual and organizational learning, and preparing for leadership succession. I can attest to the power of board mentoring professionally (as a mentoring subject matter expert) and personally (as a volunteer board leader). Mentoring has made me a better board contributor, increased my commitment to the organization, and been extremely gratifying.

## **Orienting new board members**

I sit on the board of a national educational agency. Over the past five years, we have streamlined all of our board processes, structures, and board member expectations. Every new board member is now assigned two mentors from day one — a veteran board mentor *and* a staff mentor — to hasten his or her integration and involvement. The board development committee does the matching.

Mentoring partners meet virtually and/or in person prior to and after every board meeting during the first year of board service. The board mentors welcome the new board members into the “organizational family” by introducing them to the people, issues, and work of the organization and serving as go-to people and sounding boards. The staff mentors’ job is to translate organization alphabet soup and familiarize new board members with the organization’s current and long-term programmatic and financial operations. As both mentors get to know the new board member, they confer about how to best utilize the mentee’s time and talent and enhance his or her board experience.



After one year of service, one board member commented to me, “I’ve served on many boards and never before felt so welcomed; as a result, I am more willing to give my time. I feel connected to the people, the work, and the mission of the agency. Because of that, I am able to better represent its mission to our stakeholders.”

### Promoting ongoing individual and organizational learning

A long-term health care organization hired me to develop a peer mentoring program for its board members. The goal was to continuously educate board members about complex health care issues and trends. At the first meeting of the year, they receive a 12-month board education agenda and are invited to share their expertise and/or experience in critical areas and to mentor fellow board members. These critical areas include board issues, policy making, budgeting, allocations, relocation, advocacy, and the endowment.

One board member, an attorney with years of experience in the health care field, agreed to share his knowledge of the changing health care environment and critical issues facing providers. After listening to his presentation, several board members realized how complex the issues were and how difficult it was to fully understand them. The attorney then agreed to mentor these members and bring them up to speed in time for a major board decision.

Peer mentoring is a powerful tool for board education because it engages

people and harnesses the individual and collective power of the board. It has the added advantage of facilitating more trusting and meaningful board member relationships, building board cohesion, and ultimately contributing to the level of shared understanding that promotes more informed decision making.

### Preparing for leadership succession

A high-profile community women’s board I work with has embedded mentoring in its succession planning. The leadership succession plan kicks in two years prior to the chair-elect’s assuming responsibilities. The past and current chairs meet with the chair-elect individually and then together to formulate a development strategy that incrementally increases her responsibilities, introduces her to key stakeholders, gives her more visibility, and involves her intimately in working on strategic issues. The chair-elect identifies the competencies that she needs to develop and with her mentors puts milestones and timelines in place for helping her progress. The result is that when the chair-elect becomes the chair, she is well grounded and fully prepared to lead and serve the organization. A chair who has been through the two-year process attributes her success as chair to her mentors’ ongoing support and guidance and is eager to “pay it forward” to the next chair-elect.

### The power of mentoring

In talking with new board members, I hear remarkable stories that speak to the power of mentoring. They can’t imagine not having a go-to person to answer questions, bounce ideas off of, and help sort out organizational puzzles. They tell me they feel more comfortable more quickly because they have established meaningful relationships. And because they are able to grasp the big picture faster, they are able to make meaningful contributions to their boards sooner.

To build, grow, and support a viable board mentoring culture, you should do the following:

- Establish concrete learning objectives and long-term goals that you can measure and celebrate.

- Secure visible support, involvement, and commitment from the highest levels of the board and staff. Involve the governance committee in developing, implementing, and evaluating the program.
- Determine how you will pair mentors and mentees (this will depend on your goals and learning objectives). Consider involving both staff and board members as mentors. When necessary, be willing to look outside your organization for mentors; for example, your governance committee chair might ask a governance committee chair in a sister organization to be his or her mentor.

### RESOURCES:

*Creating a Mentoring Culture: The Organization’s Guide* by Lois J. Zachary. Jossey-Bass, 2005.

*The Board Building Cycle: Nine Steps to Finding, Recruiting, and Engaging Nonprofit Board Members, Second Edition*, by Berit M. Lakey. BoardSource, 2007.

### MENTORING DOs AND DON’Ts

- \* Do establish points of connection early on in the relationship. Don’t assume because you serve together that you know each other.
- \* Do be sensitive to the day-to-day needs of your partner. Don’t forget to find out what else is on your partner’s plate.
- \* Do identify and utilize multiple venues for communication. Don’t rely on face-to-face interaction alone.
- \* Do set a regular contact schedule, but don’t be inflexible.
- \* Do check regularly on the effectiveness of communication. Don’t assume that the messages you are sending are being received or understood.
- \* Do talk about the effectiveness of the mentoring process. Don’t forget to evaluate learning progress.