



BOARD BUILD

A COHORT-BASED APPROACH TO
IMPROVING BOARD GOVERNANCE

When You'll Know if Board Build is Right for Your Nonprofit

We are excited to share this overview of our Board Build program at Support Center. Special thanks to the NYC Department of Youth and Community Development for making this report possible. For several years, we have evolved this board development model that combines peer learning opportunities with a board self-assessment and individualized support for organizations, including a facilitated board retreat. We ultimately settled on a hybrid model for a few reasons:

Facilitated training with peers makes a significant difference. We all have plenty to learn about the functioning of boards. Sharing a common space with a facilitator and peers is a great way to understand, explore and unpack the many roles of a board, ranging from fundraising and outreach to building an increasingly diverse and equitable board. Easy stuff, right? It's not that there is one right answer, but getting on the same page about these roles, responsibilities and requirements is a good place to start.

Establishing a board baseline is Step 1. We're not huge fans of the term "board self-assessment." To many it can feel judgmental and discouraging. However, the Board Build program expects that each participating organization undergo a baseline assessment to understand "where are we" as a board developmentally. We believe deeply that this aspect of the Board Build program establishes a common understanding and a baseline so that we can look at our board progress over time.

Retreats work. The conventional wisdom these days is that an annual board retreat is a good thing, but if we don't make the most of that time together, it may not be. On the other hand, a facilitated board retreat that focuses on "now what" and builds off a baseline assessment is a proven way to move from assessment to real board action. With a commitment to follow-up, Board Build participants have shared measurable progress against agreed upon board goals (e.g., board fundraising, recruitment, meeting effectiveness).

There is plenty more about the program in the pages that follow, and we welcome opportunities to discuss it with peers, potential participants and funders who may be interested in applying this approach locally. We hope to hear from you and look forward to your feedback.

Sincerely,



Keith Timko
Executive Director



HOW TO KNOW IF BOARD BUILD IS RIGHT FOR YOU

What is it?

Board Build is a special kind of governance capacity building program. Distilled and refined from Support Center's nearly half-century helping nonprofits through organizational development and executive transitions, Board Build is an intensive, five-month program for nonprofit executive directors and their board chairs that combines organizational diagnostics, expert-led workshop sessions, peer-led sharing & learning sessions, one-on-one consultation, board retreat facilitation, and post-retreat strategic planning assistance.

Who is it for?

Board Build is not for any one kind of nonprofit, but rather for an organization with a specific set of challenges that are common to a wide range of organizations. A variety of organizations – ranging from budgets of \$50,000 to more than \$16 million, from start-ups to century-old institutions, from business improvement districts to human service organizations – are tapping into this new model of governance capacity building to move their nonprofits to a significantly higher level of organizational functioning and mission focus.

How does it work?

Organizations participating in Board Build have a common realization of need: In order to make progress on everything from fundraising to long-term strategy, the members of their nonprofit board need to advance to a higher level of engagement. The CEO (or executive director) and board chair recognize that the best way to develop optimal board engagement is by examining their own performance and developing new strategies based on governance best practices *and* the experiences of peer organizations.

When should we do it?

To be eligible for participation in Board Build, leadership of the nonprofit – both CEO and chair – must recognize the value of developing a shared vision of board governance and must commit their time to an intensive program. The CEO and chair must be ready to share their challenges with a cohort of about six other organizational leaders and be open to learning from the experiences of others. Often, a funder makes resources available and encourages its grantees to participate in Board Build, but ultimately the leaders themselves must be ready to make the commitment.

“One thing I found to be interesting about the Board Build model was the way the participating organizations helped one another and how much we learned from each other.”

-Board Build Participant

PROGRAM ELEMENTS

1-ON-1 CONSULTING

CEO & CHAIR APPLY JOINTLY

First Month

Self-Assessment &
Agreement on Priorities

Workshop #1
Introduction & Fundamentals

PEER GATHERING #1

Second Month

Workshop #2
Board Roles & Responsibilities

PEER GATHERING #2

Third Month

Workshop #3
Structure, Committees & Recruitment

PEER GATHERING #3

Fourth Month

Workshop #4
Board Composition & Recruitment

PEER GATHERING #4

Fifth Month

Workshop #5
Structure, Committees & Meetings

PEER GATHERING #5

BOARD DEVELOPMENT
RETREAT

FACILITATED RETREAT

POST-RETREAT FEEDBACK

DEVELOPMENT OF 6-18
MONTH BOARD PLAN

Application Process

The Board Build program application process is itself an important first step in a nonprofit's learning and self-examination process. The CEO and chair jointly apply, starting the process to examine their governance needs and committing to work together to develop a shared vision.

Board Self-Assessment and Analysis

Prior to the first Board Build workshop session, the CEO and chair attend, the organization's board members are asked to complete an in-depth survey that helps diagnose its performance on a wide range of governance practices related to fundraising, processes, culture, recruitment, meeting effectiveness, and other areas that frequently present challenges to nonprofit boards. In the first workshop session, the CEO and chair, along with the other leaders in their cohort, go over their self-assessments and identify the core issues the group feels should be the priority for work over the following five months.

Workshops

Each CEO-chair team participates in five three-hour workshops, spaced out over five months and led by a seasoned Support Center consultant who has decades of demonstrated effectiveness running nonprofits and leading group learning programs. Board Build's funders and the nonprofit leaders participating in the program are engaged in shaping the exact learning priorities for each cohort, but the basic elements of the structured workshops delve into:

- ◆ Governance Field Review, Introduction to Core Governance Topics and Language
- ◆ Board Roles & Responsibilities
- ◆ Structure, Committees & Meetings
- ◆ Board Composition & Recruitment
- ◆ Board Culture & Dynamics

Interwoven throughout these sessions are deep discussions into fundraising best practices; how to advance diversity, equity and inclusion; how to nurture appropriate relationships between all staff and board; and new thinking on how to align resources with evolving mission priorities.

Peer Gatherings

In between each workshop session, the cohort of CEO-chair teams come together in peer-centered, facilitated conversations to delve more deeply into their own experiences with the topics covered in the workshop sessions and other related issues that come up during the Board Build program sessions. Participants share their challenges and successes and develop mutually supportive relationships across roles.

One-on-One Consultation

Each organization is able to access approximately 25 hours of one-on-one time with the Board Build consultant over the course of the program. Among past participants, some have utilized less time and others more. The consultant is available for one-on-one hours in-person and by phone and email. This includes help developing and facilitating a board retreat (see below). Consultation hours, in past cohorts, have been mostly utilized by CEOs, but chairs can also tap into this resource.

Facilitated Board Retreat

One important product of each CEO-chair team is the development of a board retreat that helps the organization tackle a core self-identified challenge. The Board Build consultant works with the CEO-chair team over the five-month program to develop and plan a board retreat and facilitates the retreat so that both the CEO and chair can be fully engaged in the discussion.

Post-Retreat Strategic Planning

Following the organization's board retreat, the consultant meets again with the CEO to give feedback on the retreat proceedings and identify priorities for the organization's governance advancement. In this concluding stage of the program, the organization develops a six- to 18-month board plan, which they also share with their cohort for group feedback.

While Board Build is an intense five-months of active learning, the relationships participants develop – with members of their cohort as well as with the consultant and Support Center staff – often continue well past the formal time frame of the program.

Case in Point

WOODHAVEN BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT

Reflections from Raquel Olivares,
Executive Director, Woodhaven BID

"When we started Board Build, I had only been the executive director for four months and my organization also had new board members who really didn't understand their roles, especially their involvement in fundraising. I am the only staff person. We had also been bringing on new board members without being strategic about what skills and expertise we needed on our board. And, we certainly had a 'people don't know what they don't know' situation. I felt frustrated that I wasn't getting support from my board."

"The Board Build learning sessions and peer sharing focusing on board responsibilities and creative approaches to fundraising were especially useful to me and the Chair of Woodhaven BID. Having five other organizations – some of which were very different in mission from us, but experiencing similar issues – was so beneficial. Sharing and learning from each other was very important, and we still talk to each other now after having gone through the five-month program. The time my Chair and I spent on Board Build was challenging. At the beginning, my Chair didn't really want to spend three hours attending each workshop, but he ended up happy as soon as he experienced the first session. And the networking – for both the executive director and the Chair – is fantastic."

"The Support Center consultant leading our cohort was also essential to our organizational progress. He had scheduled hours for consulting, but was always available to us. The consultant helped me be clear about what I really wanted to get out of the retreat and was absolutely crucial in planning it, our first board retreat ever. The retreat our consultant facilitated was fantastic, it really helped members get to know each other because they come from such different backgrounds – now our board wants to do it every year."

"Board Build helped with my relationship with my board Chair. He came to understand why I was asking for certain types of support. After the training, my Chair and board really understood their responsibilities, and we are bringing on board members who embrace the expectations we have of them. It has had a big impact on how we look at board recruitment and identifying candidates who understand the role and bring specific expertise, for example in law or social media. We have a board package we provide new members."

"On the fundraising front, we're thinking differently about fundraising and planning our first gala. Support Center has been good at continuing to share resources with us after we completed the five-month program. This experience brought my board to another level."



EVALUATING BOARD BUILD'S RESULTS

Board Build has a solid track record of results. Three cohorts of nonprofits have moved through the five-month program and are reporting back on their experiences. Two of the cohorts were comprised of nonprofits supported by the New York City Department of Small Business Services, and a third was with nonprofits supported by NYC's Department of Youth and Community Development. A wide variety of organizations – on dimensions of size, history, and mission – have participated in Board Build and provided feedback on what works.

The core program elements (described on pages two and three) form Build Build's stable backbone, but Support Center leaders and consultants have systematically evaluated the program in each three cohorts and continue to identify areas for improvement and refinement. Participants noted the importance of inter-nonprofit partnerships (especially among leaders in the same organizational role) that help elevate their work. Support Center continues to create new mechanisms to help nonprofits support each other, share resources and assist with specific tasks. Participants say this synergy is a crucial Board Build ingredient and want even more of it.

While all three cohorts have completed the five-month program within the last two years and Support Center is not able to definitively assess the long-term impacts on

individual organizations, the short-term results based on surveys of participants are very positive.

Some of the learning that participants found most useful centered on balanced board recruitment, insights on board roles and staff communication, and how to effectively engage board members in fundraising. In the evaluation survey, Support Center asked participants to detail some of the results of their involvement in the program and found high levels of ongoing board development activities. For example, "I plan to create a package for new board members to provide them with clear information about our institution, including a job description for each position, bylaws, etc. I am also recruiting four new board members in the next fiscal year with the strategies that I learned in the program. Another strategy I plan to use is to schedule a small get together for board members, which I heard from feedback provided by board members after the retreat."

Another suggested, "I would like to move my board to actually create a strategic plan with action items and goals. I think the retreat Board Build facilitated was a necessary first step but we would like to put together a facilitated strategic planning session." Over the three cohorts, participants and their funders gave many helpful suggestions that are now part of the current structure of Board Build.

“Board Build helped me to be more organized and provided me with ideas to motivate my board as well as to be more transparent with the management of the organization. The program provided me with the opportunity to become closer with my chair and to work on future projects as a team.”

-Board Build Participant

COSTS AND TIME COMMITMENTS

Support Center has designed the core elements of the Board Build program based on its experiences with a wide range of nonprofit organizations, but past funders have tailored the curriculum and subjects emphasized in a given cohort based on the particular needs of the participating organizations. When a funder makes the program available to six of its grantees at once, the specifics of the program can be customized to the needs of the cohort.

“Thank you to [our funder] for making this training available to us and for the flexibility of the facilitator for the retreats. It was indeed a great experience, not only for me but for my board chair, who is now more motivated and involved.”

-Board Build Participant

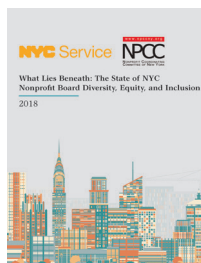
With the program structure and depth of consultant engagement described in this paper, the Board Build five-month program has a cost of \$7,500 per nonprofit organization. Given that each organization participates in 15 hours of structured learning, at least 7.5 hours of facilitated peer group sessions and approximately 25 hours of one-on-one consulting, retreat development work and post-retreat planning over the course of the five-month program, participation in Board Build is a relatively modest financial investment but a large commitment of time for each CEO and Chair pair. The time commitment has varied somewhat depending on whether a nonprofit organization develops a separate board retreat to focus on board development issues or simply sets aside some time within a scheduled board meeting for a facilitated discussion.

CONTINUING ACCESS TO RESOURCES FOR PARTICIPANTS

The CEO/Chair teams participating in Board Build receive a wide array of printed and online readings, tools and other resources over the course of the five-month program, especially during workshops and in one-on-one consulting sessions. But at the conclusion of the program they also receive access to many proprietary Support Center resources and templates based on each organization's specific planning needs at that time. Some include:



- ◆ NYC Service Good Governance Blueprint: <https://bit.ly/33Unxct>



- ◆ What Lies Beneath: The State of NYC Nonprofit Board Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: <https://bit.ly/2QJIPFr>



- ◆ Leading With Intent: BoardSource Biannual Board Survey <https://leadingwithintent.org/>



For funders interested in supporting their grantees' participation in Board Build or individual nonprofits interested in joining a new Board Build cohort, please contact:

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