

Why Board Assessments Are So Important

Effective board development depends on identifying clear targets for improvement. This self-survey will help your board determine where to prioritize its development efforts.

Board assessments are designed to strengthen relationships, build trust, and improve individual and organizational effectiveness. They enable boards to step back from the preoccupations of regular board business, candidly review board performance, and develop action steps to strengthen board operations, communications, and interactions. This self-survey board assessment can help establish:

- A clearer understanding of the board's primary roles and core responsibilities
- A renewed sense of commitment to the institution's mission and purpose
- Consensus on specific objectives and plans to improve board organization and performance
- More productive board meetings
- A better working relationship between the board and the chief executive
- A commitment to expectations for personal philanthropy

How This Self-Survey Works

Boards succeed or fail in their abilities to fulfill specific roles and responsibilities. The structure of this self-survey aligns with the areas and duties that define effective board service.

This self-survey has been curated from our full 75-question assessment of foundation boards so that you can conduct it on your own. It focuses on six major areas of board responsibility and activity:

1. Mission and Strategy
2. Leadership
3. Oversight and Accountability
4. Philanthropic Leadership
5. Board Performance
6. Board Culture

Each section includes assessment ratings for evaluating the board's performance as well as open-ended questions where members can provide comments and suggestions. Answers to the assessment ratings will capture your board's sense of its performance. Answers to the open-ended questions will help you understand why members rated the board as they did. Both are important for gaining a balanced sense of the results. In this way, the survey serves as a diagnostic tool for determining the current state of your board.

How to Conduct Your Self-Survey

Confidentiality and candor are the keys to a successful board assessment. Board members must be completely confident that their responses will only be used to constructively improve the board.

This self-survey is designed to highlight your board's strengths and to reveal areas where you may need to improve your performance. In particular, it will help you to confirm that your board understands and is fulfilling its governance roles and responsibilities. We recommend that you conduct the survey during a working session or retreat—perhaps in conjunction with making plans for continuing board development.

Please provide these instructions to members as they complete the survey:

1. This survey is designed to assess the board's collective performance.
2. Rate the board as a group. Account for variations in individual performance by raising or lowering your overall rating. For example, if some, but not all, members are addressing a certain responsibility, lower your rating accordingly.
3. If you are new to the board, select "Don't Know" for things you cannot yet assess.
4. Many responsibilities span multiple components. Please read the entire question before selecting your answer.
5. Responses are confidential and will be reported in the aggregate. Please answer with openness and candor.
6. Answers to open-ended questions will be reported verbatim. Please avoid identifying yourself or others.

Participant Profile

What is your role on this board? Please check one.

- | | |
|---|------------------------|
| Chief executive of the foundation | Board member |
| Chair of board | Administrative officer |
| Other board officer | Staff |
| Other (please describe your role) _____ | |

How long have you served on this board?

- | | |
|------------------|------------------|
| Less than 1 year | 10 to 12 years |
| 1 to 3 years | 13 years or more |
| 4 to 6 years | N/A |
| 7 to 9 years | |

Do you have a vote on the board?

- Yes
- No

Section 1: Mission and Strategy

Effective foundation boards develop a thorough knowledge of both the foundation and the institution’s mission, strategic priorities, challenges, and opportunities. Board members are charged with ensuring the appropriateness of their foundation’s mission, ensuring that it is aligned with the institution’s mission and that it guides both their work and the strategic priorities of the foundation.

Please assess the board’s performance in this area of responsibility.

The board...

	Poor	Fair	Satisfactory	Very Good	Excellent	Don't Know
Ensures the foundation’s mission is aligned with the affiliated institution’s mission and strategic plan						
Is well informed about the current issues facing higher education and tax-exempt organizations						

Please provide comments or suggestions related to the board’s performance in the area of Mission and Strategy:

Section 2: Leadership

To govern effectively, the board works to establish a strong partnership with the chief executive of its foundation. Effective boards work collaboratively with the foundation chief executive, other board members, and institution leaders.

Please assess the board’s performance in this area of responsibility.

The board...

	Poor	Fair	Satisfactory	Very Good	Excellent	Don't Know
Has policies and practices that define the responsibilities of the foundation chief executive and board, and institution administrators and board						
Has a plan or policy that addresses an unanticipated or planned departure or absence of the current chief executive						

Please provide comments or suggestions related to the board’s performance in the area of Leadership:

Section 3: Oversight and Accountability

The board is accountable for maintaining the foundation’s fiscal integrity, preserving and protecting its assets, and providing financial oversight. In order to make informed decisions and fulfill their fiduciary responsibility, board members must focus their attention on the foundation’s finances and potential significant risks to the institution.

Please assess the board’s performance in this area of responsibility.

The board...

	Poor	Fair	Satisfactory	Very Good	Excellent	Don't Know
Reviews the results and addresses concerns of the internal and external audit						
Supports the highest standards of transparency and accountability to safeguard donor privacy, serve institutional interests, and preserve public trust						

Please provide comments or suggestions related to the board’s performance in the area of Oversight and Accountability:

Section 4: Culture of Philanthropy

Effective boards engage directly in fundraising and provide diligent stewardship of philanthropic contributions. Board members set an example by personal giving and active participation in the fundraising process.

Please assess the board’s performance in this area of responsibility.

The board...

	Poor	Fair	Satisfactory	Very Good	Excellent	Don't Know
Serves as ambassadors by telling the institution’s “story” and making the case for private support						
Provides exemplary leadership during the planning and implementation of a major campaign						

Please provide comments or suggestions related to the board’s performance in the area of Culture of Philanthropy:

Section 5: Board Performance

The board monitors its own overall performance, ensuring that foundation policies about board member responsibilities, development, ethical behavior, and conflicts of interest are current, understood, and followed. The board uses its meetings and members effectively to accomplish its work.

Please assess the board’s performance in this area of responsibility.

The board...

	Poor	Fair	Satisfactory	Very Good	Excellent	Don't Know
Has the right mix of skills and abilities among board members						
Focuses on board level work and avoids micromanagement of administrative responsibilities						

Please provide comments or suggestions related to the area of Board Performance:

Section 6: Board Culture

The board establishes a culture of engagement built upon trust, respect, and a commitment to inquiry and inclusion. It conducts itself in an exemplary manner and acts with transparency.

Please assess the board’s performance in this area of responsibility.

The board...

	Poor	Fair	Satisfactory	Very Good	Excellent	Don't Know
Understands and respects who may speak on behalf of the foundation						
Provides opportunities for board members to get to know one another personally						

Please provide comments or suggestions related to the board’s performance in the area of Board Culture:

Summary Questions

I feel satisfied that:

	Not At All Satisfied	Slightly Satisfied	Moderately Satisfied	Very Satisfied	Extremely Satisfied
My time, energy, and expertise are put to good use					
The board takes reasonable care to ensure the foundation is legally and ethically compliant with its mission, the law, and all institutional policies (duty of obedience)					

Strengthening Board Performance

How important do you think it is for the board to...

	Not a Priority	Low Priority	Medium Priority	High Priority
Increase its knowledge of auxiliary and affiliated organizations				
Strengthen its oversight of investments				

What is the board's most significant accomplishment over the past two years?

What change or action would most improve the board's performance?

Policies and Practices

This section should be completed by only one person, designated by the foundation to respond on behalf of the board. The questions will not be visible to other respondents.

Please respond to the following questions related to board policies or practices.

	Yes	No	Don't Know	Not Applicable
Did the board, or a committee of the board, meet with the auditors without staff present?				
Do board members sign a conflict-of-interest and disclosure statement annually?				

Evaluating the Survey Results of Your Self-Survey

Boards tend to rate themselves above average, but assessments typically reveal variability in performance and relative areas of strength. In analyzing the information gathered with this tool, focus on the areas where:

- The board scored lowest
- Board members gave inconsistent ratings
- Comments indicated a need for change, information, or attention

To make the most of this effort, we encourage you to use these results to educate the board about its responsibilities, inform your plans for continuing board development, and take action to enhance your board’s performance.

How AGB Can Help with Your Assessment

AGB has 100 years of experience strengthening governing boards. Helping boards assess performance is the foundation on which to build improvement. Here are some resources from AGB thought leaders that will help you determine when and how to conduct your board assessment:

Assessing Board Performance: A Practical Guide for College, University, System, and Foundation Boards

Marla J. Bobowick and Merrill P. Schwartz

Ensuring its own effectiveness is one of the board’s basic responsibilities, whether members are appointed or elected. This guide provides practical resources and expert advice to help boards identify areas of concern, strengthen their performance, and continually educate and renew themselves.

2018 • 76 pages

When to Take a Second Look at Your Board

AGB

A Q&A with Theodore Long of AGB Consulting discussing the need for board assessment, signs when a board should look to improve, common mistakes boards make, and how restructuring and revitalizing a board can make the institution’s governance better.

Trusteeship magazine, May/June 2013

The Incalculable Benefits of Revitalizing Your Board

Rev. Dennis H. Holtschneider, C.M.

The Rev. Dennis H. Holtschneider, C.M., president of DePaul University, shares that institution’s experience of growth and academic rise and the role its board played in both.

Trusteeship magazine, May/June 2013

You may also decide that you would benefit from objective, outside assistance as you assess your board. AGB offers three types of board assessment support. In addition to this self-survey, we can:

- **Conduct a full foundation board survey or interview your board members and your president or CEO** and provide a written report of the results with a summary of best practices for making improvements in each assessment area.
- **Provide a written interpretation of survey or interview findings by an AGB consultant** with institution-specific recommendations for strengthening your board’s performance. Our consultant will present the written findings in a video call with your board leaders, chief executive, or entire board.
- **Conduct a one-day, on-site board development workshop** that uses the results of your assessment and benchmarks from effective boards to help you develop an action plan for board development.

Use these resources to ensure you are employing best practices as you administer this self-survey. They will be especially helpful as you interpret and evaluate the results of your assessment.

You may need additional help, especially if your board faces complex internal dynamics or external challenges. AGB can help you navigate the entire board assessment process and target meaningful action based on the results.