

Donor Decision Tool

Guide to Interviewing a Nonprofit Board Member

Members of nonprofit boards are typically passionate champions of the organizations that they serve. After all, they freely donate their time, skills and, usually, money to the cause. Speaking with a board member—ideally the chairperson—will allow you to tap into that passion and learn more about the organization.

A conversation with a nonprofit's board member will also help you pressure test the impression you have formed to date. Does this person's perspective align with others you have heard? Do the organization's leaders and the board share priorities and agree on the same challenges and opportunities?

You may find that you need to work with the board to fulfill your philanthropic vision—will that sort of collaboration be possible? Talking, even briefly, with a board member can reveal how the board operates and how receptive its members are to input and new ideas.

Again, take care to balance your desire to learn more with the time you're asking of busy individuals.

If you only have an hour, posing the seven questions below should help you cover the most important ground. If you have enough time to cover more, you could mix and match from the entire set of questions below.

Take care to balance your desire to learn more with the time you're asking of busy individuals.

Seven critical questions:

1. Why did you become involved in the organization, and what has your involvement looked like over time?
2. How would you characterize the board's role in the nonprofit organization?
3. If this organization were to be on the cover of your favorite newspaper or magazine in five years, what would the story be about?
4. How would you describe the goals of the organization, and how does the organization achieve these goals?
5. How focused on results do you believe the organization is?
6. What attributes does the executive director have that will enable him or

her to accomplish the nonprofit's goals? Are there areas of professional development on which the executive director should be focused?

7. How do you bring on new board members? Tell me about the most recent addition to the board. Can you discuss the capabilities of the board individually and collectively?

To probe deeper, here is a full list of questions, listed by topic, that effective philanthropists say they've found useful.

Governance

- Why did you become involved in the organization, and what has your involvement looked like over time? What do you think are your own strengths as board chair/member? What do you try to bring to the board and the organization?
- How does the board work with the executive director and the rest of the organization?
- Does the board review key strategies and financial decisions? What systems are in place to make sure decisions happen with the board's oversight? What was the last real disagreement the board had? How was it resolved?
- What do you do for/with the organization in addition to board meetings? What about other board members?
- Do board members have content or functional experience that informs the organization? Where do you hope to build capabilities?
- What accountability measures does the board have in place? How do you measure your performance as a board?
- How long is a term, and how long have members of the current board served?
- How do you bring on new board members? Tell me about the most recent addition to the board. Can you discuss the capabilities of the board individually and collectively?

Executive director and senior leadership

- What is your opinion of the overall strength of the leadership team?
- What attributes does the executive director have that will enable him or her to accomplish the organization's goals? Are there areas of professional development that the executive director should be focused on?

- How does the executive director engage you in strategic planning?

Organization

- If this organization were to be on the cover of your favorite newspaper or magazine in five years, what would the story be about?
- What sets this organization apart from others?
- How would you describe the goals of the organization, and how does the organization achieve these goals?
- How focused on results do you believe the organization is?
- How would you evaluate the organization's financial management?
- What is your impression of the organization's funding situation? How do you imagine the organization might achieve sustainability?
- Do you think the organization has strong processes in place? Where does it need to develop capabilities?
- What capabilities does the organization need to build? You may have questions around program management, development, HR, finance, or government relations.