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Self-Assessments for Nonprofit Boards

The Maine Association of Nonprofits has perfectly summed up the critical importance of regular self-assessments for boards:

[E]ven the best organizations need a periodic check-up to ensure that they cannot just survive but will really thrive in today's environment. To check your board's vital signs, or to put in place practices and strategies for a healthy and energized board, the best place to start is with a board self-assessment."

BoardSource's [Leading with Intent](#) survey regularly finds a relationship between board self-assessment practices and performance. BoardSource recommends that boards assess their performance at least every two years.

One way to begin is to ask each member to reflect on their role as a board member in preparation for a general discussion about the [role of the board in general](#). Then, put the latter topic on the agenda for a future board meeting. This basic but beneficial discussion is often overlooked. Many people serving on a nonprofit's board have never done so before, and others may have served on a nonprofit board that has different expectations for its members. A basic discussion about the role of the board will help set consistent expectations.

In addition, diverse perspectives can affect the ways in which individuals react to self-assessments. As a preliminary step it might be useful to discuss how diverse perspectives may impact the process, so that goals of inclusiveness are taken into consideration both when designing the assessment and when interpreting the results.

Once expectations are managed, the next step is to invite board members to participate in a self-assessment process that will reveal how close or far away the board believes it is from the expectations it has set for itself. The results of the self-assessment can help identify issues needing clarification, gaps in skills the board may need to be successful, and topics for future board education. Importantly, the self-assessment process will engage the board in the same process that the nonprofit itself should be familiar with: [measuring its own effectiveness](#).

The bottom line is that effective boards are those that regularly and candidly ask themselves: "How can we do better?"

Self-assessments may feel threatening to some board members, and getting buy-in to devote time to the process may itself take some time.

More About Boards and Governance

- [Board Roles & Responsibilities](#)
- [Organizational Self-Assessments](#)
- [Tip sheet for encouraging candid conversations with the board](#)

Additional Resources

- [Board Self-Assessment tool](#) and link to the free guide, "Is Your Board Ready for Self-Assessment?" (Maine Association of Nonprofits)
- BoardSource offers [various self-assessment tools](#) for purchase (discounts for members of state associations may be available).
- The New Hampshire Center for Nonprofits administers and scores their [Board Self-Assessment tool](#) for clients. Free to Center members, modestly priced for others.
- [Sample self-appraisals](#) for the board as a whole and individual board members (Evangelical Council of Financial Accountability)
- [Successful board self-assessments](#) (BoardSource)

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