Improving Nonprofit Board Leadership

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Insights from North Carolina Nonprofit EDs and CEOs, Board Members, and Funders

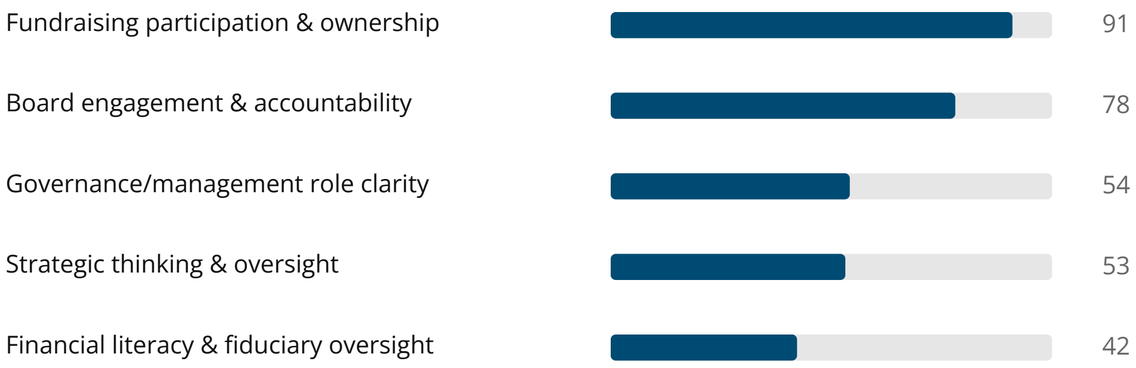
Nonprofit boards are filled with committed people. Yet many boards still struggle with the clarity, engagement, and strategic focus needed to govern effectively and maximize organizational impact. *moss+ross* is sharing results from qualitative and quantitative research on nonprofit board effectiveness, drawing insights from board members, nonprofit executives, and funders who often experience both sides of board leadership.

WHAT RESPONDENTS ARE SAYING

Nonprofit leaders are aligned on the greatest governance needs.

Funders stress the need for clear fiscal understanding and sustainability.

Survey respondents want practical structures that help capable people contribute.



Greatest governance needs, select up to 3 (n=151).

RECRUITMENT REALITY

Board recruitment still leans heavily on trusted networks.

83% personal networks of current board members

51% ED/CEO recommendations

36% community members mission-connected

26% formal recruitment process or skills matrix

Only 26% of survey respondents reported using a formal recruitment process or skills matrix. Community leadership pipelines were cited by 1% of respondents. Funders say they see the need for stronger, more diverse pipelines of board-ready leaders in our region.

This is a capacity-building story. Board members bring skills, networks, and a desire to serve. The opportunity is to make expectations clear and give those strengths a reliable path into governance action.

WHAT LEADERS WANT TO LEARN

Leaders want practical ways to increase engagement and accountability.

Outcomes that would make training worth recommending, select up to 3 (n=151).

In their own words: what respondents wish they had known sooner

59 open-ended responses coded by theme; categories are not mutually exclusive.

"What exactly was expected of me in writing. No ambiguity."

ROLES & EXPECTATIONS

"The time commitment that it takes to fully lean in and govern and support in a meaningful and sustainable way."

TIME & ENGAGEMENT

"How to be the best board member possible in the areas of fundraising, asking financial questions, developing strategy and connecting with the CEO."

INTEGRATED BOARD SERVICE

"The fundamental shift from leading and managing within a company to enabling via dialogue and governance."

GOVERNANCE VS. OPERATIONS

Source: BoardReady Pilot Discovery Survey, updated SurveyMonkey export. Multiple-selection questions; percentages do not sum to 100%. Response quality file used to exclude 3 poor-quality records. Counts show respondents selecting each item when prompted.

The Path to Stronger Governance

BOARDREADY | CONNECT. LEARN. SERVE.

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CONSTRUCTIVE READING

This is a preparation story, not a deficit story.

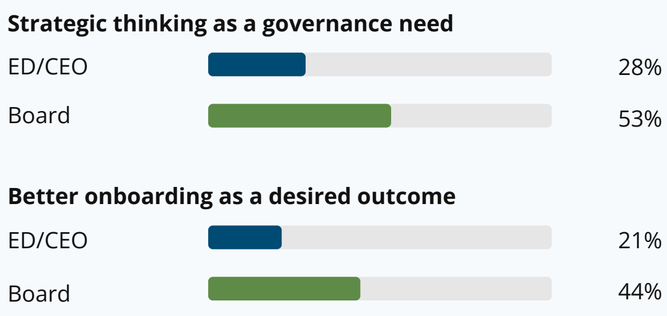
The findings do not suggest that board members lack commitment or skill. Capable people experience governance from different perspectives - and better preparation can help them fulfill their desires to serve well.

Role comparisons use ED/CEO n=68 and Board Member n=34.

ED/CEO Board Member

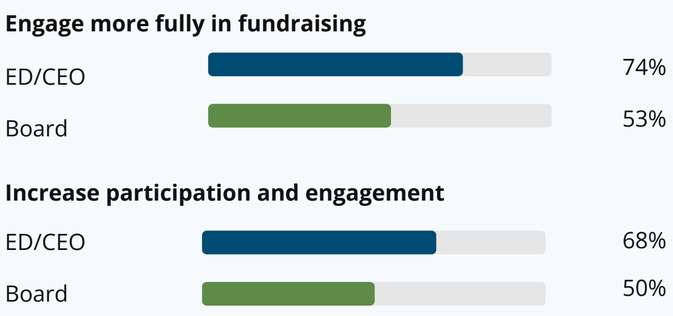
Board members name readiness.

They are more likely to ask for strategic preparation and better onboarding.



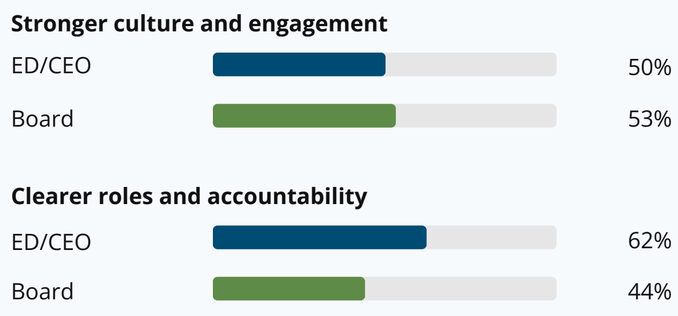
ED/CEOs name contribution.

They are closest to the daily work of engaging boards in fundraising, participation, and shared responsibility.



All see a similar path to improving the ability to serve.

The shared need is stronger culture, clearer roles, and a more productive Board-CEO partnership.



QUESTIONS FOR THE SECTOR

Better preparation leads to better governance.

Fundraising, oversight, accountability, and strategy all depend on role clarity and shared expectations.

A stronger board pipeline starts before placement, with shared language about what service requires and how people can contribute.

01 What dialogue should these research results prompt between executive directors and board leaders?

02 How can fundraising expectations be clear without narrowing who feels welcome?

03 How do personal networks become broader civic leadership pipelines?

04 What does onboarding look like from the board member's perspective?

05 How can boards strengthen accountability while preserving trust?

06 What helps capable people move from willingness to confident service?

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The practical implication: Make expectations explicit before service begins, then support board members as they translate their skills, networks, and commitment into governance action.

FROM INSIGHT TO ACTION

BoardReady
Connect. Learn. Serve.

In response to these findings, moss+ross is developing BoardReady, a structured, cohort-based experience designed to prepare individuals for effective board service, strengthen the pipeline of board-ready leaders, and connect them with nonprofit boards through a curated placement process. The program is grounded in practical application to strengthen the ability of board members and nonprofit executives to lead with greater impact.

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