



# No Rest for the Weary: Where Do Nonprofit Boards Go From Here

By Nanette Fridman

Impressive. Since mid-March, your board chair and your CEO/ED have provided invaluable leadership. Attendance at your regular and emergency board meetings has never been better. Board members are engaged, and volunteering their time and expertise in financial modeling, medicine, construction and design, human relations, and loan preparation in unimaginable ways. You are on scenario plan G... or is it H? You steered your organization through rough waters and accomplished a lot!

There was little or no summer break, so not only do you approach September *unrefreshed*, but your board chair and members, the CEO/ED, and the organization's staff are drained and exhausted.

While we wait (and wait, and wait....) for a vaccine, how can the board keep up this pace, and stay focused on the issues related to Covid; its regular oversight work; and long-term planning and projects like strategic planning, campaigns and exploring collaboration?

**1. Recognize and Appreciate the Heroic Efforts.** Before we go any further, stop, thank and recognize the contributions of each person – board, staff, volunteers, partners, donors, vendors and more – who pulled the organization through the last 5+ months. You can send them a little care package, toast them at your next Zoom meeting and/or mention them in your newsletters and social media channels. **Practice gratitude.**

**2. Clarify Roles for Task Forces, Committees, and Individual Board Members.** If you convened a COVID or an emergency task force in March, is it still going? Is the original charge valid? Now that we are in another phase, do you need different task forces or committees? How does the work of your standing committees change, if at all? What are new expectations for board members? Are you adding board meetings this year?

Clarify your working groups, committee charges and expectations for everyone.  
**Don't assume; write it down.**

**3. Recenter Your Board.** At one of your next meetings, ask how you've lived your mission and values (or not) over the last 5 months. Don't have organizational values? Need to update your mission? Brainstorm (and consider a process for formalizing them now or later). **Get back to basics.**

**4. Rework Your Board Materials and Agendas.** During these unprecedented (there I said it) times, we need to do more updating on operational issues than normally recommended at a board meeting. Consider sending out a COVID written update prior to each board meeting, then leave time on the agenda for any related questions. Don't forget to make agenda space for more strategic conversations, for example: *What are the lessons learned from your virtual engagement? Has it changed how you think about whom you serve? What has Covid done to your existing strategic plan? When and how can you start that planned giving program you meant to launch this past spring?*

**Balance your agendas.**

**5. Set Short-term, Medium-term and Long-term Goals.** While everything is impacted by the pandemic, you still want to ensure good business practice, and engage in goal setting. Hopefully, the board is (re)setting strategic goals, along with its own board goals; and the staff is determining operational goals. These are the benchmarks for work to be done during the year, and how you measure progress. **What gets measured, gets done.**

**6. Radically Prioritize.** If your staff and customers aren't safe and comfortable, you can't carry out your mission. If your organization isn't financially sustainable, you won't be able to carry out your mission. Radically prioritize, and avoid taking on new work unless you have the human capital to get it done without jeopardizing your priorities. It's okay to say no. **Sometimes less is more.**

**7. Update Your Board Communication Strategy.** Your board may be used to meeting monthly, but in this environment, one month can be a lifetime. Plan to send updates in between board meetings, and consider drop-in virtual office hours with your CEO/ED and board chair for those wanting more information. **You can't over communicate.**

Your work and your organization's mission should be a source of great inspiration. Take a deep breath; reflect on this journey we've been on since March; be proud of all

you've accomplished; and get ready for a busy fall. **Governance matters, especially under these circumstances.**

As the Swedish proverb reminds us, "Rough waters are truer tests of leadership. In calm water, every ship has a good captain."

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