

## This is Not a Drill

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At BoardSource, we have sometimes talked about the fact that boards are a team that never gets to practice — that each time the “team” comes together, it’s a “game day” situation. While this is absolutely true, it’s also true that some “games” are higher stakes than others.

This is why we often encourage boards to build their “practice” by tackling hypotheticals or unanswerable questions in moments where they have the time and space to ponder — and maybe even fumble a bit — as they learn how to work together as a team to unpack complex issues. By building up all of the things that

boards need to be able to do when the stakes are high, they will have the muscle memory that enables them to rise to the occasion when they're needed most.

Now, in this moment, we see the value of this investment. While some boards are struggling to come together as a team, others are tackling the challenges of the moment with a set of skills and ways of working together that have been cultivated by years of leaning into board work. Things like:

### **Knowledge of and familiarity with the organization's programmatic and operational strengths and vulnerabilities**

It's difficult for boards to act quickly and responsively in any crisis if they don't already have a firm grasp of what the organization does, why it does it, and how well it does it, with what degree of operational excellence.

What impact is your organization seeking to have, and to what degree are you succeeding? How is the organization working with other organizations, and what interdependencies exist as a result? What are the drivers of revenue and net? These are just a few examples of the type of questions and understanding that enable board members to engage deeply in conversations about programmatic and organizational adaptation, partnership exploration, and creative resource development options in a way that is well-informed and helpful. Without this understanding, board members aren't able to provide valuable input or counsel, or — even worse — the input they provide is inappropriate or irrelevant based on lack of understanding and context.

Similarly, it's also important that the board has a good understanding of the chief executive or executive director's skill sets and growth edges, as this positions the board to help bolster areas where the chief executive may need additional support versus areas where board engagement is less critical and may simply get in the way. It's a scary time to not have a good sense of a CEO's skill set and competencies in terms of financial management, strategy and planning, and emotional resilience. And those boards that don't have to wonder about things like "how well do we think our CEO understands our financial position?" are much better off.

### **Trust in each other and their ability to grapple with big issues as a team**

When boards have had an opportunity to do real work together, they build bonds of trust, understanding, and collective confidence in the group. They are less susceptible to an anxious desire for control — a normal human impulse in a crisis situation — and are able to trust in the board's ability to come together as a group to make good decisions. This enables them to provide support, counsel, and guidance to the staff team in a way that builds calm, continuity, and consensus. That's key in a crisis

situation, when the impact of an individual board member “going rogue” or trying to exert executive-like control can be catastrophic.

### **A shared sense of organizational purpose and values that guides all decision making**

Above all else, to lead effectively through a moment like this, boards need to have spent time cultivating a shared understanding of what's most important for their organization. This goes far beyond understanding what the organization's mission or key programs are; it's about what is fundamental for the organization. What it would never do. What it will always do. And why. It's that level of understanding of the organization's purpose and values that enables a board to move with confidence through necessary conversations about programmatic changes or cuts, new ways of doing things, and how to be responsive to the changing needs of the people and communities they serve.

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These are good skills and attributes for boards in any moment, but the crisis we are facing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic has made the stakes so much higher. Indeed, no organization will come through this crisis unchanged — the challenges that we face as a nonprofit sector and as individual organizations are simply too deep and too vast for that to be possible. But the most skilled and adaptable boards are better equipped to face the existential questions they are experiencing, and to do the kind of rapid sense-making and adaptation that these circumstances require.

For many, that will make all the difference.

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