

ASSESSMENT FOR LIBRARY BOARD MEETINGS

Worksheet adapted from Sandra Nelson and the NYLTO project

1. **PLAN MEETINGS TO ADDRESS SPECIFIC TOPICS AND ACTIONS:** Good leadership begins before a meeting. Typically, the board chair and the library director work together to plan meetings with specific outcomes in mind. Agendas are built around action items.

Do we plan our meetings to address specific topics?

- ____ a. We never preplan a meeting to address specific topics.
____ b. We sometimes have a rough preplan.
____ c. We always preplan meetings and submit the plan to the board for approval.

2. **PLAN MEETINGS TO MEET MEMBER EXPECTATIONS:** Good planning includes a consideration both of what the members expect to get out of any particular meeting and of what they expect to get out of their membership on the board itself. A well-planned agenda is necessary, but it cannot produce a successful meeting unless the board members have been given pre-meeting information about it.

Do we plan our meetings in relation to what members expect from them?

- ____ a. Members have no input in the agenda.
____ b. If members specifically request something, it is added to the agenda.
____ c. We frequently ask what members expect before building our agenda.

3. **PLAN MEETINGS TO FOCUS ON THE BOARD'S RESPONSIBILITIES:** The library board is responsible for hiring the library director, creating the mission for the library, securing adequate funding for the library, managing the library's funds, adopting policies, and evaluating the library's service program. The library director is responsible for the day-to-day operation of the library: hiring and supervising staff; building the library's collections; planning and implementing programs and services, budget as well as daily and monthly financial responsibilities, etc.

Do we focus on the board's responsibilities?

- ____ a. We often make decisions that affect the day-to-day operations of the library.
____ b. We sometimes discuss the day-to-day operations of the library.
____ c. We focus on the board's responsibilities and let the director manage the day-to-day operations of the library.

4. **PROVIDE INFORMATION NEEDED TO MAKE INFORMED DECISIONS IN A TIMELY MANNER:** Library board members are responsible for making important decisions that affect the library's funding, policies, and mission. Board members need to have pertinent information in time to read and consider it before being asked to make any decision.

Do we receive the information needed to make informed decisions in a timely manner?

- ☐ a. Information pertaining to an issue under consideration is normally distributed during the meeting in which the decision will be made.
- ☐ b. We occasionally receive information about an issue prior to the board meeting in which the issue will be considered.
- ☐ c. We normally receive the information to review prior to the board meeting during which the issue will be considered.

5. **HOLD ALL SCHEDULED MEETINGS:** Most libraries are open 52 weeks a year. A library board cannot be effective if it does not meet on a regular schedule. Sometimes library boards have difficulty in reaching a quorum of members and are unable to act on the library's behalf. Other boards may decide to skip meetings in the summer or over holiday periods.

Do we meet regularly?

- ☐ a. We have trouble getting a quorum and usually cancel at least one summer meeting and our December meeting.
- ☐ b. We occasionally have trouble getting a quorum of members and occasionally cancel board meetings because of holidays.
- ☐ c. We meet at scheduled times with a quorum of members.

6. **DEFINE AND CLARIFY THE ISSUES UNDER DISCUSSION:** Many boards get bogged down in discussing or acting on issues because they do not agree on the problem, they are addressing. Effective boards work together to clarify and agree on the problem.

Do we define or clarify the problem to be addressed during meetings?

- ☐ a. We seldom clarify the problem we are addressing.
- ☐ b. We attempt to define or clarify the issue when confusion is evident.
- ☐ c. We normally begin consideration of issues by identifying and agreeing on the problem to be addressed. During the discussion of an issue, we periodically revisit our problem statement to be sure that we are still in agreement.

7. **FOCUS ON THE ISSUES:** Anyone who has ever been a member of a board knows the frustrations that can arise from letting discussion stray off topic. Members need to develop a feeling of responsibility to other members of the board and to the important work of the board.

Do members stay focused on the topics under discussion?

- ☐ a. One or more members frequently wander off topic
- ☐ b. We wander about as much as the average board.
- ☐ c. Members almost always focus on the topic under discussion.

8. **SUMMARIZE PROGRESS BEING MADE ON THE STRATEGIC PLAN OR MAJOR INITIATIVES:** Unless everyone on a board is clear about what has already been done and what still remains to be worked on the board cannot make informed decisions. Frustrations are likely to develop from a feeling that the board is getting nowhere.

Do we summarize the progress being made on the strategic plan or major initiatives from time to time?

- ____ a. We do not take time to take stock.
- ____ b. We examine our progress if someone requests it.
- ____ c. We frequently summarize what has been accomplished.

- 9. USE APPROPRIATE METHODS AND PROCESSES:** Effective boards use a variety of methods in their deliberations. A method that is effective in one circumstance may be unsuitable in another. For example, an open brainstorming session would be appropriate for a discussion of the ways to increase community awareness and support of the library. However, brainstorming would be inappropriate when discussing a personnel issue.

Do we use different methods to address different issues?

- ____ a. We use pretty much the same methods over and over.
- ____ b. We think about the best methods for handling some issues, but not others.
- ____ c. We try to select the method most appropriate for the issue under consideration.

- 10. CHECK FOR CONSENSUS OR "DECISION-READINESS:"** Many boards think that they are being democratic as long as all decisions are put to a vote rather than left to one or two members. Actually, if some members are hesitant about making a decision, it may mean that the board has too little information to make a decision. Forcing decisions in such instances by calling for a vote may lead to premature action and create dissatisfaction or lead to a bad decision.

Do we check to see if we are ready to make decisions?

- ____ a. We usually call for a vote when anyone asks for it.
- ____ b. We sometimes take an informal poll to see if we're ready to make a decision.
- ____ c. We frequently check to see that everyone is satisfied that we are ready to make a decision.

- 11. SPREAD RESPONSIBILITIES AMONG THE MEMBERS:** In some boards, the chair takes care of most of the board responsibilities. This may make the chair inefficient because s/he is overloaded or give him/her so much power that the members have no part in board decision-making and setting the library's direction.

Do we spread responsibilities throughout the board?

- ____ a. Most responsibilities are given to the board chair.
- ____ b. Sometimes board members share in responsibilities.
- ____ c. Responsibilities are widely distributed throughout the board.

- 12. USE COMMITTEES EFFECTIVELY:** Many library boards have committees to facilitate the work of the board. Often these committees were established in the board by-laws and have not been reviewed or revised in many years.

Do we review our committee structure regularly and make changes as needed?

- _____a. We have never considered revising our committee structure.
- _____b. Sometimes we create new committees, but we rarely consider whether we still need the existing committees.
- _____c. We review our committee structure annually as a part of our regular review of our by-laws.

13. DISCUSS BOARD MORALE ISSUES: Board fatigue, general lack of interest in activities, conflicts, or anxieties can occur in any board. If morale problems are acknowledged and faced frankly by the board, the chances for remedying them are greater than if they are ignored and allowed to fester.

Do we discuss morale problems such as lack of interest, conflicts, and anxieties in the board?

- _____a. We never openly face these problems.
- _____b. We face those problems that are not too charged with emotion.
- _____c. We accept these problems as things to be discussed and solved.

14. FACE THE INEVITABLE TENSE SITUATIONS THAT COME UP WITHIN THE BOARD: Occasionally situations occur that create tensions among board members. Although the tensions are obvious, the reason for the tensions may not be clear.

Do we tackle tense situations?

- _____a. We ignore tense situation.
- _____b. We sometimes attempt to defuse tense situations.
- _____c. We usually acknowledge, discuss, and work to resolve tense situations.

15. CREATE AN ATMOSPHERE IN WHICH ALL FEEL COMFORTABLE: If members of a board feel inhibited about saying what they think, they may not have complete confidence and trust in other members of the board or the library director. People feel free to express themselves frankly in an atmosphere of friendliness, informality, and mutual respect.

Do we have an atmosphere in which all feel free to express ideas and feelings?

- _____a. Our discussions are formal and only a minority of members participate.
- _____b. Everyone talks but some subjects are taboo.
- _____c. We usually have an atmosphere of free, spontaneous expression.

16. PRESENT A UNITED FRONT: Boards that have had a history of divisive interactions may have members who work to subvert the board's actions. Members should be given full opportunity to express their opinions, but in the end, they should support the final board decision.

Do we present a united front when decisions have been made?

- _____a. Some board members refuse to support decisions they disagree with and work outside of the board structure to have those decisions reversed or ignored.
- _____b. Occasionally one or more board members will actively oppose a decision the board has made, but we generally keep our disagreements within the board.

- _____c. We have a process for addressing divisive issues. Members respect one another and conflicts are resolved within the board. Members do not work to overturn or subvert board decisions.

17. LEARN FROM EXPERIENCE: Boards often fall into unconscious patterns of behavior that are sufficiently embedded to continue as members leave the board and new members are appointed. This can make new members uncomfortable and may discourage them from fully participating in the board's meetings.

Do we regularly take stock of our assumptions and unconscious patterns of behavior and make changes as needed?

- _____a. We rarely think about how we operate as a group.
- _____b. If we have a serious problem that we cannot resolve, we discuss it to try to determine the cause.
- _____c. We regularly consider our assumptions and encourage all members to question the status quo and suggest improvements in the way we manage our meetings.

SCORING INSTRUCTIONS

To assess your board meetings, give yourself the following points. Note: The value of each "a" is 1. The value of each "b" is 2. The value of each "c" is 3.

	Insert Appropriate Total	Multiplier	Product
Total number of "a"		X 1	
Total number of "b"		X 2	
Total number of "c"		X 3	
TOTAL SCORE			

EVALUATING YOUR SCORES

The possible range of scores is 17 to 51. If your score was:

- 44 - 51: Congratulations! Your board meetings are quite effective. You may want to make minor changes to improve your effectiveness and you will need to continue to monitor your meetings to be sure they remain effective.
- 35 - 43: Your board meetings are generally effective, but there are things that you could do that would improve your effectiveness. Use your responses to the checklist questions to identify areas that need improvement and work with your fellow board members to make the needed changes. Be sure to monitor your meetings and continue to look for ways to improve.
- 17 - 34: Your board meetings are not very effective. There are a variety of changes that could be made that would improve the board's effectiveness. Consider asking a consultant from your library system to meet the board to provide training and guidance for improving your effectiveness.