

Sample Board Mentoring Program

How someone feels in joining a new board depends greatly not just on orientation but to what extent they feel actively included.

Joining a board can feel at first that you are joining a private club where there is shared history and vocabulary. You may find it awkward, figuring the basics of introductions, where to sit, and what to say or not say. This has been made all the more so, as the necessity of holding virtual meetings makes personal connections more difficult.

New members who have relationships with some of the board members or have served on previous boards are likely to be more comfortable in that setting, making small chat before hand sitting back and observing, and cautiously venturing into discussions without feeling they are asking the proverbial “stupid question” For those less familiar, or perhaps serving for the first time on a board, they might feel that they have entered a space where they are somewhat intruding and are on the outside of the group, perhaps even feeling they are not very welcomed. This is unfortunate. It is up to the board leadership minimize any feelings of being “outside” of the board team, and work to maximize involvement and productive engagement. The first few months of board service (and the first few board meetings) are critical to successful board performance and retention.

That is why [organization] is implementing a board mentor program for new board members. The role of a board mentor is to welcome the new board members into the "organizational family" by introducing them to the people, issues and work of the organization, and serve as a go-to person and provide a sounding board. This should have multiple benefits: an experienced board member makes a new friend, a new board member is successfully integrated into the board, and our board will have fostered a level of board engagement that will benefit us for years to come.

As a board mentor, your assignment is to:

- **Participate in the orientation, if possible.** Every new board member should receive an onboarding orientation, including a board manual. A board mentor can help to fill-in gaps, offer context when necessary, and translate any acronyms or terms that are used.
- **Meet with/call the new board member before the first board meeting.** Provide an overview of the board culture, the board roles and its committees, how to prepare for the meeting, and what to expect at the meeting(s) (including how the meeting flows, and any practices that may be unique to your board).
- **Make sure the new board member knows the process for joining a committee** (for example, the out VP communications will reach out for contact information following the board member’s election).
- **Arrive to the first board meeting on time.** Be sure that the new board member sees a friendly face upon arrival, [save a seat next to your own at the board table]; and make sure he or she gets introduced as people come into the room or Zoom.

- **Work with the board chair to ensure that the board agenda allows time at the start for a formal introduction.** While board members may have seen the new board member's bio, this is an opportunity for you to fill-in the blanks and offer something along the lines of: "One thing I learned that her bio doesn't tell you is..." Make sure there is also time for the rest of the board to offer their own introductions too so your new board member knows who is sitting at the table.
- **Serve as a coach during the meetings.** If you sit next to the new board member, you can quietly provide additional background information, translate terms and acronyms, and help him or her navigate through the board materials. On Zoom, you can privately chat.
- **Follow-up between meetings.** Debriefing after meetings is especially important for new board members who may be looking for some additional information, a bit of history, or the perspective that a long-time board member can bring.
- **Connect if he or she misses a meeting or call.** You want to send the message that attendance is important and that his or her participation was missed. Take the time to call and walk him or her through some of the key discussion items. Please don't send the message, "You didn't miss much."
- **Check-in regarding committee assignments.** Make sure they feel that they are on the right committee and the work feels meaningful. Do not hesitate to talk to the board chair or the committee chair if you identify any problems.
- **Communicate with the board chair and chief executive,** especially if you have concerns or feel there are special steps they can take to help engage the new board member. This should be a team effort.
- **Organize one social occasion outside of the board meeting,** coffee, cocktails (actual or virtual) with you and perhaps a few other board members.
- **Keep notes** - During the first year of the experience with your mentee, keep notes of what could be incorporated to improve the mentoring experience; ask for feedback from your mentee.

We expect that these activities will stretch over the course of the first six months of the board members' tenure, but that you will always "be there" for that member in the future.