

INSIGHT BRIEF

REAL-WORLD INSIGHTS FROM THE
HAAS LEADERSHIP INITIATIVE

BOARD DEVELOPMENT



evelyn & walter
HAAS JR. fund

MAKING THE BOARD COUNT

The Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund has included support for board development as a core component of the **Haas Leadership Initiative** since 2005. We've learned that strengthening the board can mean different things for different organizations at different times. Sometimes, it is about helping the board step up to its leadership role in fundraising, or embrace its other responsibilities for ensuring that the organization can fulfill its mission and achieve its goals. Sometimes it is about getting board members to forge a stronger working partnership with the executive director and staff. Sometimes it is about changing the culture of the board. And sometimes it is about addressing multiple priorities at once.

But whatever the focus, successful board development happens when the work of strengthening the board is grounded in a broader effort to chart a successful path forward for the organization. In other words, board development has to be about more than simply equipping boards with the skills and the systems to do their work more effectively. It has to be about answering this question:

“What does this organization need its board to be – and do – in order to succeed?”

In this brief, we share what the Haas, Jr. Fund is learning about effective board development. We also share the stories of three diverse organizations that have received support from the Haas Leadership Initiative to strengthen their boards. This publication is intended for funders and others in the social change sector who are interested in tapping the potential and the power of boards to help organizations achieve their goals.

INTRODUCTION

Most people will pay lip service to the important role nonprofit boards play in the effective functioning of organizations. Dig a little deeper, however, and it's not hard to find a pronounced ambivalence about the contributions of boards.

THE MAIN COMPLAINTS?

● ***“My board is driving me nuts.”***

Executive directors sometimes view their boards as a challenge to be managed, rather than a partner in steering the organization to a successful future.

● ***“Why are we here?”***

Board members often are unclear about their role. Many get tired of being “talked at” during board meetings or drowned in reports, with little chance for real engagement and conversation. Others get too deeply involved in the organization's day-to-day work, straining relationships with staff and eventually burning out.

● ***“I have to ask people for money?”***

Fundraising is a common source of irritation and tension for many boards. Most boards are expected to lead their organizations' fundraising efforts, and yet board members often feel unprepared to fulfill this vital role.

DESPITE THIS AMBIVALENCE, FEW WOULD DENY THAT BOARDS CAN PLAY A VITAL LEADERSHIP ROLE FOR THEIR ORGANIZATIONS.

Through the Haas Leadership Initiative, we have witnessed the power of strong boards working in concert with staff to achieve real and lasting impact.

“If you are investing in leadership for nonprofit and social change organizations, you cannot ignore the board. We have seen time and again how organizations get better results when their boards get support to become active partners in leading their organizations.”

- LINDA WOOD, DIRECTOR OF THE HAAS LEADERSHIP INITIATIVE

REAL-WORLD EXPERIENCE

FROM THE FLEXIBLE LEADERSHIP AWARDS PROGRAM

The FLA program starts with a simple question: “Where does your organization want to go and what kind of leadership does it need to get there?”

Over the past decade, the Haas, Jr. Fund has provided over \$25 million through our Flexible Leadership Awards (FLA) program to help leaders from more than 70 grantees get better results for their organizations and movements.

“When our grantees look at where they want to be in the next few years, a significant number decide that one of the crucial things that will get them there is a stronger board,” said Paula Morris, FLA program director. In fact, a five-year evaluation found that FLA grantees chose to spend more money on board development (15%) than executive director development (10%).

Grantees have used these resources to rethink the board’s role, deepen board engagement in governing and advocacy, and improve its capacity to function as a team, in several cases to transformational effect.

Specific supports have included: **coaching for board leaders and executive directors** to clarify roles and responsibilities; consulting to help boards manage **executive transitions; training in fundraising** and financial oversight; and more.

For more information go to www.haasjr.org.

WHAT WORKS TO BUILD STRONGER BOARDS

While we are still learning how to do this work more effectively, the Haas, Jr. Fund is beginning to form some ideas about what works to generate positive results for boards and their organizations. In the pages that follow, we discuss the following eight recommendations in further detail with examples drawn from our experience supporting board development.

- 1 ENGAGE THE BOARD AT THE RIGHT LEVEL**
- 2 CREATE A “CULTURE OF PHILANTHROPY”**
- 3 ANTICIPATE EXECUTIVE TRANSITIONS**
- 4 SUPPORT BOTH THE EXECUTIVE AND THE BOARD**
- 5 MAKE SURE THERE IS BUY-IN AND FOLLOW-THROUGH**
- 6 REVISIT BOARD COMPOSITION AS WORK EVOLVES**
- 7 PICK CONSULTANTS WHO ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS**
- 8 HELP THE BOARD TRACK ITS PERFORMANCE**



ENGAGE THE BOARD AT THE RIGHT LEVEL

Building a stronger board means getting it engaged at the appropriate level and in a way that allows it to contribute substantively to an organization's overall direction and work.

According to Bill Ryan, a consultant and lecturer with Harvard's Kennedy School of Government who has worked closely with the Haas Leadership Initiative, the key to successful board development is building a "generative board." Such a board, he explains, plays an important part in identifying emerging issues for the organization, developing a compelling vision and strategies to guide its work, and thinking about how to assess whether the organization is succeeding or not—i.e., how will the organization know when it is achieving its goals?

CREATING A MORE GENERATIVE BOARD was the goal of the National LGBTQ Task Force, a grantee of the Flexible Leadership Awards program. Pam David, who has served on the Task Force's board since 2007, said that she and other board members recognized a need to invest in board development after it became clear that the organization was not tapping the full power and expertise of its board of diverse corporate, philanthropic and movement leaders from across the country.

“Board members were hungry for substantive conversation and wanted to engage at a strategic level in the work of the organization, but we had not organized ourselves to do that.”

- PAM DAVID, LGBTQ TASK FORCE BOARD MEMBER

To try and resolve this, Task Force Executive Director Rea Carey worked with consultant Susan Colson to create time at board meetings for deep conversations about the future of the organization and the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender movement.

One especially constructive conversation, Carey recalled, was about what happens when the movement has achieved marriage equality from coast to coast. In other words, how will the movement and the Task Force pivot from the marriage fight, which has required a significant amount of the movement's resources, to the broader campaign to make sure LGBTQ people are free from discrimination and have equal rights and opportunities in all facets of their lives?

Among the results of conversations like these, is a new strategic plan that positions the Task Force for sustained leadership in the LGBTQ movement.

“The board is operating at a much higher level because we are engaged on these important issues, and it is having a clear impact on the organization’s ability to plan and to make sure it stays in front of these issues.”

- SHILPEN PATEL, CO-CHAIR OF THE LGBTQ TASK FORCE BOARD

Reflecting on her work with the Task Force, consultant Susan Colson said the most important role of a nonprofit board is “sense-making” for the organization. She defined this role as “looking to the horizon, understanding the field you are in, and helping the executive director with strategy issues that she or he may not have thought through quite yet.”



TO BOOST FUNDRAISING CAPACITY, INCLUDE THE BOARD IN CREATING A “CULTURE OF PHILANTHROPY”

More often than not, fundraising is the issue that drives organizations to prioritize board development.

Boards need focused coaching, training and other support to step up to their leadership role in fundraising. However, our experience also suggests this is not enough. We have observed that engaging boards as active and enthusiastic participants in an organization’s fundraising often starts with involving them more deeply in planning, visioning and setting strategy for the organization.

UnderDeveloped, a 2013 report on nonprofit fundraising from CompassPoint Nonprofit Services, found that executive directors in the sector overwhelmingly complain that board engagement in fundraising is lacking. The report laid out clear roles and responsibilities for boards in fundraising; it included among its 10 recommendations for the field that boards should be “trained differently” when it comes to fundraising. Specifically, the report concluded, “Capacity builders need to update their board fundraising curriculum to address what it takes to systematically create and sustain a culture of philanthropy, including the specifics of effective partnership among the board, the executive director, and the development director.”¹

Haas, Jr. Fund grantee Girls Inc. of Alameda County, which provides services for girls living in high-risk, underserved neighborhoods, used a large portion of its Flexible Leadership Award to manage a transition to a new executive director.

¹ The UnderDeveloped report defined a “culture of philanthropy” as follows: “Most people in the organization (across positions) act as ambassadors and engage in relationship building. Everyone promotes philanthropy and can articulate a case for giving. Fund development is viewed and valued as a mission-aligned program of the organization. Organizational systems are established to support donors. The executive director is committed and personally involved in fundraising.” For the full report, go to <http://www.compasspoint.org/underdeveloped>

However, staff and board leaders also recognized the time was right to re-engage the board as ambassadors and fundraisers for the organization after more than 30 years of leadership under the founding executive. In retreats and regular board meetings, the board and the new executive worked with consultants to build board members' skills as ambassadors for the organization and to establish fresh "give-get" expectations for what board members should be bringing into the organization.

Girls Inc. Executive Director Linda Boessenecker, who joined the organization in 2007, credited the board's fundraising activity with Girls Inc.'s 2013 move to a new \$11.5 million headquarters, which is Alameda County's first and only resource center for girls. She added the organization's budget has grown by a third as a direct result of the board's "give-get" commitments.

Boessenecker said the board's success in supporting Girls Inc.'s fundraising is due to a combination of focused training and a deliberate effort to build stronger ties between her and the board as partners in leading the organization.

“Fundraising is about leadership, so if you build leadership for your board you will build your fundraising capacity.”

- LINDA BOESSENECKER, GIRLS INC. EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



ANTICIPATE THE ESSENTIAL ROLE BOARDS PLAY AT TIMES OF EXECUTIVE TRANSITION

A strong and engaged board can help an organization weather times of change, including executive transitions. “The moment your executive director is leaving is not the moment to start building the board’s capacity,” said Paula Morris, FLA program director for the Haas, Jr. Fund.

An executive transition can be a critical opportunity to think about where an organization is and where it wants to go. Of course, the basic responsibilities of the board when an executive director steps down are to weigh what to look for in a new leader and to manage the hiring process and transition. But the board should make the most of this opportunity and ensure that the organization uses the transition to shape a successful future.

Bill Ryan’s 2013 evaluation of the Haas, Jr. Fund’s Flexible Leadership Awards program describes how participating organizations that were experiencing an executive transition used their support to strengthen the board’s ability to manage the change. “With consulting help,” Ryan wrote, organizations “developed a profile of their ideal candidate; assisted the departing EDs by helping them identify and tackle the leadership challenges of their ‘end game’; and improved their boards and senior management teams to ensure the departing ED did not create a disabling vacuum.”

Once the new leaders were in place, Ryan noted that these organizations used their resources from the Haas, Jr. Fund to support strong “on-boarding” for the executives and to build effective working partnerships between the board and the new staff leaders.

Despite the assumption that times of executive transition can be a time of peril for organizations, Ryan found that all of the transitioning organizations except

one registered success in meeting and exceeding the leadership and mission goals they set at the start of their engagement in the Flexible Leadership Awards program.

Girls Inc. of Alameda County used a portion of its Haas, Jr. Fund support to embark on a board-led process to select Linda Boessenecker as its new executive director and ensure a successful leadership transition. The transition from longtime executive Pat Loomes to Boessenecker, while stressful, is considered an unqualified success by the staff and board of Girls Inc. Many pointed to coaching for the organization's senior board and staff leaders as a major factor in easing the transition.

“The board really stepped up during the transition. They were prepared and knew what sorts of changes were needed and what they wanted in a new leader.”

- LINDA BOESSENECKER, GIRLS INC. EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

She added that the board development work around the transition set the stage for a stronger working partnership between her and the board today. “Our board today is a real resource for me in thinking about the future and in opening doors for this organization.”



SUPPORT THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR IN ADDITION TO THE BOARD

For a board to fulfill its leadership role effectively, the board and the executive director have to forge a powerful partnership. This, in turn, can require coaching and consulting support for the executive as well as the board.

Supporting the board and the executive separately is usually not enough. They need to work together to strengthen trust and build a solid working relationship.

Executive directors often approach board development with some trepidation. They might see board development as an exercise that will increase the power of the board relative to their own. Or perhaps they like the freedom and the flexibility that come with having a board that is not fully engaged in the organization. Whatever the case, investments in board development are unlikely to deliver favorable returns when an executive doesn't buy in. Sometimes, he or she will need help to see and understand importance of strengthening the capacity of the board.

“Funders should not waste a penny on board development in an organization where the CEO is not engaged and supportive of the idea of the board becoming a more powerful force.”

- NANCY FRANCO, FLA CONSULTANT

There is always a possibility that a CEO will never come around to embracing board development. But our experience is that most executive directors are receptive to the idea that investing in board development will help the organization tap its full potential, especially when they are offered coaching and other support to build a strong working partnership with their boards.

When Marielena Hincapie became executive director of the National Immigration Law Center (NILC) after several years as a senior staff member at the organization, she was “not at all prepared” to work with the board, she said. She admits that she was surprised by the amount of time she spent on board issues in her initial months on the job.

“Figuring out how to partner with the board was one of the biggest challenges I faced.”

- MARIELENA HINCAPIE, NILC EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

To meet the challenge, Hincapie received one-on-one coaching from Franco about how to engage the board and how to design and run board meetings. This helped Hincapie establish a strong partnership with the board. Among the results of this partnership are a successful effort to diversify the board’s membership and a visionary new strategic plan for the organization.

“We are now more equipped at the staff and board levels to be more strategic than we have ever been, and a lot of that is due to the way Marielena is working with the board,” said NILC board member Iris Gomez.



BUILDING BETTER-PERFORMING BOARDS: A Q&A WITH BILL RYAN

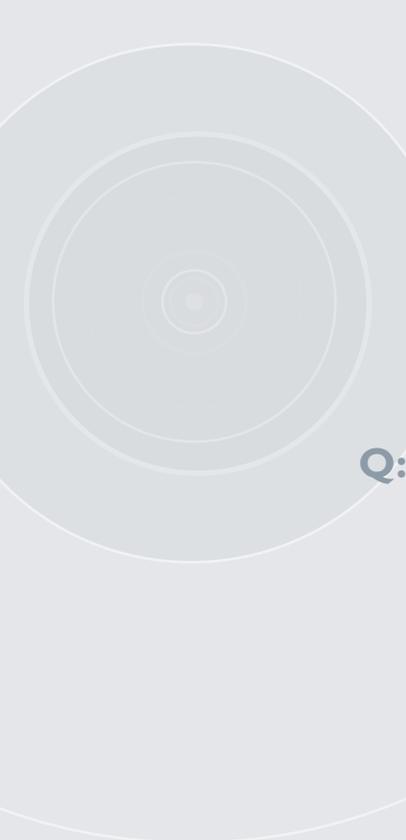
Bill Ryan is the author of *Governance as Leadership: Reframing the Work of Nonprofit Boards* (John Wiley & Sons, 2005, with Richard P. Chait and Barbara E. Taylor). He has worked closely with the Haas, Jr. Fund on the evaluation and the design of the Flexible Leadership Awards.

Q: ARE FUNDERS PAYING SUFFICIENT ATTENTION TO BOARDS?

“My impression is that funders are aware of the importance of boards but they are not necessarily excited about their potential to contribute to the success of nonprofits and the sector as a whole. **All too often, board development is viewed as organizational hygiene and getting the basics in place. That doesn’t get anyone excited.**”

Q: WHAT ARE SOME OF THE BARRIERS TO BETTER PERFORMING BOARDS?

“**The number-one barrier is that boards generally do not stop and explore as a group what their mission is as a board and how they can contribute to the success of the organization.** Plus, a lot of executive directors are ambivalent about boards. They are uncertain how they would exercise their own vision and authority if boards become more empowered.”



BUILDING BETTER-PERFORMING BOARDS: A Q&A WITH BILL RYAN

Q: IS THERE A SECRET TO SUCCESSFUL BOARD DEVELOPMENT?

“There is a temptation to think boards can get by on technical or structural approaches alone. The idea is that you can make technical tweaks to improve board functioning, but those don’t get to the core issue of tapping the talent you have to really improve performance.

The big question that should drive board development is, ‘What does this organization need its board to be in order to succeed?’

That opens the door to figuring out how the board adds value—and it gets you to all kinds of issues, from the way meetings are run to the composition and size of the board to committee structures and more.

There is no one right approach, but what seems to matter most is the culture in the boardroom. Are board members framing and asking questions that get at the heart of the issues facing the organization now and in the future? If people start with that, then the process should ultimately lead them in the direction of creating something that engages the board and that impacts the organization in a very positive way over time.”



MAKE SURE THERE IS BOARD BUY-IN AND FOLLOW-THROUGH FOR THE CHANGE PROCESS

In the same way that board development cannot succeed unless there is active support and engagement from the executive director, it also will not go far unless the board itself is committed to change.

BUILDING BOARD BUY-IN. Sometimes, those who are seeking to improve the functioning of boards jump immediately to questions about the composition of the board, meeting agendas, and the articulation of clear roles and responsibilities. All of this is important, but the experience of the Haas, Jr. Fund's grantees suggests it is even more critical to let boards take time to decide for themselves how they can ramp up their effectiveness and impact. In other words, changes to a board's structure and procedures are more likely to deliver gains in board performance to the extent that they are based on deep reflection and engagement about the board's role in the organization.

“The most critical thing, and it is not rocket science, is simply to stop and have the conversation about where the board is and where it wants to go,” said Bill Ryan. He suggested that organizations use a retreat or “a meeting with a retreat-like structure” to engage board members in deep conversation about how things are going, what the board is doing right, what it could be doing better, and what it would take to tap members' passion, knowledge and expertise more effectively.

For some boards where passion for board service has been in short supply, this may mean trying to reconnect people with the reason why they are there. Consultant Susan Colson said she encourages boards to create opportunities for members to tell stories about how they came to be on the board and what excites them about the work of the organization.

“Particularly as new members come on the board and there is turnover, it is important for everyone to have that opportunity to tell their stories,” she said. She added that this storytelling can build rapport, respect and trust among board members and contribute to a higher-functioning board over time.

“The legislative aspects of board service are not enough to keep people engaged. They need to be able to know each other and trust each other and work together as a group.”

- SUSAN COLSON, FLA CONSULTANT

ENSURING FOLLOW-THROUGH. Once there is buy-in and enthusiasm for board development among the board, organizations will want to make sure there are individuals and committees committed to managing the process over the long haul.

“Someone has to follow through on what needs to happen,” said Bill Ryan, suggesting that this responsibility should be assigned to either a governance committee or a special task force. “Board retreats and other development work can be deep dives that don’t lead anywhere if you don’t follow through,” Ryan added.

Consultant Nancy Franco echoed Ryan in saying that there need to be at least “a couple” of board members willing to put in the time needed to manage the board development process. At the National Immigration Law Center, the process was overseen by a board development committee headed by several longtime board members and former board chairs. The Task Force relied on its board governance and diversity committee. In both cases, the chairs of these committees led the process in concert with the executive directors and board chairs of the organizations.

“People were a little scared when this all started,” said Task Force board member Shilpen Patel, who headed up the governance and diversity committee. He said his committee viewed its role as helping the rest of the board recognize the need to “change the board culture on how the board would function.”



PAY ATTENTION TO BOARD COMPOSITION IN LIGHT OF EVOLVING WORK

Boards need to ensure that their members bring a diversity of skills and perspectives to the work of the organization. But focusing on diversity for the sake of diversity should not be the goal.

An organization should focus on building a board that has the diversity it needs to achieve its goals. For some boards, this might mean bringing in members who better reflect the diversity of the communities their organizations represent and serve. For other organizations, it can mean adding members with expertise in key professional and technical areas that are important to the organization—from finance and the law to technology. And for some boards, it may mean adding members with influence and community connections to support the organization's work.

When Marielena Hincapie became executive director of the National Immigration Law Center, the NILC board was led by members who had seen the organization through the 2008 financial crisis and a recent transition from a longtime executive director. “I wouldn't say we were burned out but our energy level and appetite for governance had really diminished,” acknowledged board member Iris Gomez.

In addition, Gomez said that she and other board members identified a need to “improve the skill set” of the board, which traditionally had included lawyers with expertise on immigration law. Gomez said the board identified a need for more people with expertise in areas from philanthropy and fundraising to communications and finance.

Based on the board's understanding that it needed to diversify its ranks, the board development committee inventoried the skill sets people wanted to add

to the board and mapped out a process for identifying and bringing in new members. The committee also developed a new policy on term limits that has allowed board members to cycle off the board “in a measured way” even while ensuring that there are still board members with “core historic knowledge” of the organization, Gomez said.

Last but not least, NILC developed a new “onboarding” process that helped ensure that new board members were starting their work with the organization with a solid understanding of its work and history, as well as key policies. Today, the NILC board has 13 members and includes a mix of lawyers and non-lawyers who bring new skills and expertise to the board, as well as new diversity in areas from race and age to gender and sexual orientation.

“We have a great group with a great mix of perspectives and skills, and there is a fresh energy on the board to help drive NILC forward.”

- MARIELENA HINCAPIE, NILC EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



FIND CONSULTANTS WHO ARE A GOOD FIT AND WHO WILL ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

The right consultant makes all the difference.

Good consultants will ask the tough questions that will help the organization focus on what steps it can and should consider as it seeks to strengthen the board.

Consultants have helped Haas, Jr. Fund grantees answer critical questions like these:

- What are the problems with how the board is currently functioning, and how can board development contribute to solutions?
- What is the nature of the relationship between the executive director and the board? And what will it take to strengthen the staff-board partnership?
- Do board members recognize the need for board development, and is there a committee or other group willing to put in the time to manage the process?
- To what extent is the organization willing and able to consider changes to the composition and the structure of the board if that is deemed necessary?

Consultants working with our grantees have taken on a range of responsibilities, including: working with the executive director, the board chair and the appropriate committees to identify goals and priorities for board development; developing options and ideas for strengthening the board; and designing and facilitating meetings.

At the Task Force, consultant Susan Colson worked closely with the governance and diversity committee on these and other tasks. “Susan came in first as an observer to capture the lay of the land in terms of how the board was operating, and then she was a great partner with me and the committee in moving the process forward,” said Shilpen Patel, the former governance and diversity

committee chair. Colson's work included co-facilitating exercises at full board meetings with Patel where they engaged the board in discussions about the organization's future, and how the board could best contribute to the success of the organization.

Both Colson and Nancy Franco, who worked with the National Immigration Law Center, are consultants with special expertise and a deep interest in board development. As they worked with their client organizations, they were able to provide detailed information and research-grounded insights in what works to make boards effective.

Bill Ryan, however, said that having academic or technical expertise in board development is not an essential credential for consultants who do this work. In fact, in many places, he acknowledged that it may be hard for funders and nonprofits to find consultants with a high level of board-specific expertise.

The most important thing, Ryan said, is to find consultants who bring value in helping organizations and teams "think hard" about themselves and their vision and goals. He noted that the consultants working with the Haas, Jr. Fund have generally adopted a "coaching stance" toward their client organizations, facilitating learning and goal-setting processes, and helping boards experiment and reflect on their work.

"These aren't people who parachute in with all the answers," he noted. "They are people who travel along with the board for awhile and give them feedback and support, and help them create the mechanisms and systems for achieving their goals."

Equally important, these consultants are people whom the organizations themselves have chosen as a good fit. The Haas, Jr. Fund has adopted a brokering approach to connecting grantees with consultants, offering grantees a vetted list of possible consultants but leaving the choice of consultant to them.

"Having the opportunity to interview a number of consultants and choose someone who was a good fit and who offered the type of support we needed was critical," said Marielena Hincapie, the NILC executive director.



SUPPORT THE BOARD TO TRACK ITS OWN PERFORMANCE

Boards tend to focus their work on overall organizational performance and the performance of the chief executive—and with good reason. But an effective board also should pay attention to its own performance and contribution over time; and board development can help it develop the systems and the measures to do so.

Said Bill Ryan, “If the board commits to certain things like fundraising or outreach, it should come back periodically and say here is how we are doing.”

“The board should make sure it is not just assessing the executive’s performance but also setting and assessing its own performance.” - BILL RYAN, FLA CONSULTANT

Ryan added that the experience of identifying how to measure board performance can be a valuable exercise for boards in and of itself. He said many boards around the country currently are trying to figure out how to incorporate the use of dashboards in governing. “The most interesting part of dashboards is figuring out how to populate them. What is so important that the board wants to track it? Simply having that conversation can get you to deeper functioning for the board.”

TAKE-AWAYS FOR FUNDERS

Funders can play a critical role in ensuring that nonprofits and the entire sector are paying attention to the role of boards in supporting strong and impactful organizations. The following are a few lessons from the Haas Leadership Initiative—some learned the hard way—about how funders can best support board development.

Make board development part of a broader suite of leadership support.

Most of the Haas, Jr. Fund's grantees that have made board development a priority are doing so at the same time that they are taking other steps to strengthen their leadership—for example, strengthening staff teams or boosting their communications capacity. Our experience suggests that investments in board development are more likely to pay off when part of a broader effort to strengthen an organization's overall leadership among the staff and board.

Give grantees the time to do it right.

The Fund's Flexible Leadership Awards program gives grantees three to five years of support to implement solutions to the leadership challenges and opportunities they face. This long-term approach can be especially important when it comes to supporting board development. With many boards meeting just three or four times a year, it can take time to develop the systems and the working norms that move a board to higher performance. Ditto if the organization is trying to bring on new board members who can bring fresh ideas and new diversity to the board. "You really have to give people time to experiment and follow through and correct until they get something right and can institutionalize the change," said Linda Wood, Director of the Haas Leadership Initiative.

Combine board development with core and program support.

Alongside their Flexible Leadership Award grants, organizations continue to receive separate program or general operating support grants from the Fund. National Immigration Law Center board member Iris Gomez said this kind of “balanced support” for board development and the ongoing work of the organization is key. “You can’t invest in capacity building if there is no program strength in an organization,” said Gomez.

Remember the “soft skills” side of board development.

Boards need technical skills and knowledge in areas such as finance, ethics and the law, as well as an understanding of effective board processes and structures. But successful board development also has to pay attention to the soft skills of how boards can work as a team and how to build strong partnerships with the executive director and staff. We have found that a coach or organizational development consultant can sometimes be as important as a board development specialist in supporting a board to function more effectively.

Don’t overstep.

Board development expert Bill Ryan said the best role for foundations in supporting board development is to “provide encouragement, money and space—and generally stay out of the way.” He said boards need to have leeway to operate and decide what is best for them. “This is an area where funders should be careful not to overstep or intrude,” he said. “Funders should let boards figure out what it is they need to be. Don’t come in dropping models on them. Just give them the opportunity to build a board that fits their culture.”

BOARD DEVELOPMENT

CASE STUDY

National Immigration Law Center



Marielena Hincapie,
Executive Director

PROFILE: The National Immigration Law Center (NILC) envisions a society in which all people—regardless of race, gender, immigration or economic status—are treated fairly and humanely. NILC engages in policy analysis, litigation, education and advocacy to achieve this vision. NILC plays a critical role within the movement for racial, economic and social justice for low-income immigrants.

BOARD DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGE: After Executive Director Marielena Hincapie took the leadership reins of the organization in 2008, she and the board recognized a need to bring new voices and more diversity to a board that historically emphasized immigration attorney expertise. As a new executive, Hincapie also wanted support so she could more effectively engage the board as a strong partner in leading the organization.

SOLUTIONS: Consultant Nancy Franco helped the board development committee inventory the skill sets it needed to add to the body. She also helped the committee design a board recruitment process. In other actions, NILC’s board developed a new term limits policy that balances the organization’s interest in having new people regularly joining the board while also ensuring that there are board members with a strong sense of the organization’s history. In addition, the board development committee designed an on-boarding process that included a handbook for new board members.

“We have an impressive group of board members who can help us influence the immigrant rights movement and who have real influence in Washington to say this is the kind of work that needs to be done.”

- MARIELENA HINCAPIE, NILC EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

RESULTS: The NILC board now includes 13 people and a mix of lawyers and non-lawyers who bring new skills and expertise to the board, as well as new diversity in areas from race and gender to age and sexual orientation. Among the results: NILC has engaged the board to play a much more active part in framing a strategy for the organization and the movement for immigration reform in Washington. For example, NILC board members joined with selected staff to form an ad hoc committee that has identified changes in laws and Executive Branch policies that will help improve the U.S. immigration system.

Hincapie also said that the board has become a much stronger force in supporting NILC's fundraising.

“Before, the board didn't really see fundraising as part of its job. Now, we have shifted the culture of the board so everyone is actively engaged in raising money for the organization.”

- MARIELENA HINCAPIE, NILC EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Over five years the organization's budget has grown from \$2.2 million to \$5 million.

“The work of the board on immigration reform has helped make NILC a leader in the movement.”

- MARIELENA HINCAPIE, NILC EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

BOARD DEVELOPMENT

CASE STUDIES

The National LGBTQ Task Force



Rea Carey,
Executive Director

PROFILE: The National LGBTQ Task Force advances full freedom, justice and equality for LGBTQ people. As a progressive social justice organization, the Task Force works toward a society that values and respects the diversity of human expression and identity and achieves equity for all.

BOARD DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGE: After Rea Carey stepped into the executive director post at the Task Force in 2008, she wanted to engage the board more fully as a partner in helping the organization plot a successful future for itself and the LGBT movement. Carey and some of the board also identified a need to make board meetings a more productive use of board members' time, while defining more clearly the role of the board in the organization's work. "We just weren't at the right level of altitude," said Task Force board member Pam David.

SOLUTIONS: Consultant Susan Colson worked with the board governance and diversity committee to engage the board in conversations about how to reframe board meetings so board members could engage in "generative conversations" about issues in the movement. She also facilitated these conversations in partnership with Shilpen Patel, who was governance and diversity committee chair at the time. The Task Force board also made structural changes to the executive committee, shrinking it from 10 members to six, and took steps to diversify and build the fundraising skills of the board.

"I don't think we would have been able to get to the place where we could have a solid plan in place without the board development we've done."

- PAM DAVID, THE LGBTQ TASK FORCE BOARD MEMBER

RESULTS: Carey said the board has become an essential partner with her in thinking through important issues facing the Task Force and the movement as a whole. In early 2014, the board adopted a visionary new strategic plan for the Task Force that positions the organization as a leader in the movement for years to come. “I don’t think we would have been able to get to the place where we could have a solid plan in place without the board development we’ve done,” said Pam David.

Board member Shilpen Patel said the new plan represents “a real stretch” for the organization in terms of scaling its impact within the LGBT movement in the coming years. Examples include vastly expanding the reach and impact of the Task Force’s signature Creating Change conference and positioning the Task Force to serve as a mobilizing force for the LGBTQ movement in the years ahead on the broad range of issues affecting the lives of LGBTQ people and their families.

“You can’t take big leaps as an organization unless you have a strong and highly functioning board.” - SHILPEN PATEL

Pam David added that the board also has become a much stronger player in the Task Force’s fundraising efforts in recent years, thanks to fundraising training the board received as part of the board development process. She noted that the board raised \$1 million for the first time in 2013, up from \$300,000 in 2012.

“We have substantially increased the amount that the board is raising for the organization.”

- PAM DAVID, THE NATIONAL LGBTQ TASK FORCE

BOARD DEVELOPMENT

CASE STUDIES

Girls Inc. of Alameda County



Linda Boessenecker,
Executive Director

PROFILE: As its long-time executive director prepared to step down in 2007, Girls Inc. of Alameda County was working in a variety of disadvantaged neighborhoods to provide a continuum of services for 7,000 youth and their families in 40 schools and community sites.

BOARD DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGE: With E.D. Pat Loomes's announcement of her plans to retire after nearly 30 years, Girl's Inc.'s participation in the Haas, Jr. Fund's Flexible Leadership Awards (FLA) program provided an opportunity for the organization to plan for a secure and stable future.

At the outset, Girls Inc.'s senior managers referred to the board as "amazing" and "caring" and always ready to provide extra hands when needed. However, there was widespread acknowledgement that board members, while quite busy, were not effectively performing key oversight, governance and fundraising roles. In part, this was considered a symptom of operating under the leadership of a longtime executive director who had exercised a high degree of influence over the organization's activities and strategic direction.

SOLUTIONS: Girls Inc. used its FLA support to embark on a board-led process to select a new executive director and ensure a successful leadership transition. With the help of a consultant, the board hired Linda Boessenecker, a longtime executive with the Girl Scouts, as the new E.D. in late 2007.

"It's not often that someone gives you this kind of funding to do the visioning work you need to do in order to keep the organization alive and strong."

- PAT LOOMES, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF GIRLS INC. OF ALAMEDA COUNTY

In addition to supporting the executive transition, FLA support was used to develop “greater clarity” among the board about its governance role; to increase its size; and to get the board more involved in leveraging resources for the organization.

With FLA funds, Girls Inc. hired a governance consultant who worked with Boessenecker and the board to create a strong working partnership and to build the board’s skills and capacity in areas from fundraising to self-assessment and board member recruitment.

RESULTS: A 2012 evaluation of the FLA program found that the executive transition from Loomes to Boessenecker, was considered an unqualified success by the staff and board of Girls Inc. Many pointed to FLA-funded coaching for the organization’s senior leaders as a major factor in easing the stressful transition.

In addition, the Girls Inc. board developed far-reaching changes in recruitment practices that have expanded its membership and brought new expertise and enhanced diversity. The board also established new expectations about its role in the organization, and the role of its members as champions and fundraisers for Girls Inc.

Board and staff alike report that the reforms transformed the board’s work. Executive director, Boessenecker credited the board’s increased fundraising activity with the organization’s new \$11.5 million headquarters, Alameda County’s first and only resource center for girls. She added that the organization’s budget has grown by a third as a direct result of the board’s “give-get” commitments.

Equally important, Boessenecker said that the Girls Inc. board today is “more diverse than ever before.” It includes corporate and government leaders, experts in finance and education, and even an alumna of the Girls Inc. program.

“Today it is a completely different board operating at a completely different level.”

- LINDA BOESSENECKER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF GIRLS INC.

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Bill Ryan can be contacted at www.ryanconsultinggroup.com.

This report was written for the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund by William H. Woodwell, Jr. (www.whwoodwell.com), based on interviews with the Fund's grantees, staff and consultants. Design was provided by Isa Eaton Design.

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