

# Not-for-Profit Industry

## Tackling Board Transitions: When It's Time to Say Farewell

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Board transitions are awkward, no matter how you look at them. When it is time for a board member to transition off your board, whether willingly or not, it can feel like your organization is losing a limb, a part of its network, and a connection to its history. The cost of losing touch with valuable board members is high, and you also don't want to offend board members, even those who have underperformed during their terms. How do you navigate these tricky waters without toppling the entire boat?

Over the years, nonprofits have added safeguards to make these transitions less uncomfortable: term limits, succession planning, give and/or get requirements, etc. But like all aspects of board leadership, relationship management is key. How organizational leadership handles, and how you handle these transitional conversations, will have a lasting impact. The following tactics will help you deal with the most common types of board member transitions:

### **1) Let's Agree to Disagree: The Mutual Parting of Ways**

Nonprofits change, people change; sometimes it makes sense for both the nonprofit and the board member to part ways amicably. Regardless of what led to this situation, recognize the importance of the moment to thank the departing board member and keep him or her involved.

### **2) Sorry, We're Over: Breaking Up with Underperforming Board Members**

That one board member. You know what we're talking about. That one that doesn't fundraise, doesn't give financially or otherwise, and doesn't provide necessary credibility or programmatic expertise ... but has still managed to occupy a coveted seat on your otherwise vibrant board.



### **3) Please Don't Go! Tackling Term Limits**

Many nonprofit bylaws outline the number of terms each board member can serve, and the number of years in each of those terms. Term length and frequency varies among nonprofits. Review your bylaws for specifics, so you can properly prepare for the transition.

It is important to face each of these transitions head-on with tactful conversations.

### **HAVING THE EXIT CONVERSATION**

When it is a board member's time to step down from a leadership position with your organization, schedule a meeting with them as you approach the transition period. The meeting should include whomever holds the primary relationship with that board member. If that is not the head of the organization, try and include him or her in your conversation. If schedules don't permit, schedule a prep meeting in advance to talk through the possible outcomes.

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The “exit” conversation with your board member should hit several key points:

- > **Always Start with Thank You:** Remember to thank them for their service. Express your gratitude for their time and talent. If possible, reference something specific that they were involved with and how it impacted your organization, or perhaps calculate the grand total of funds they have raised for your organization over the years. The goal is to make them feel good about their journey with your organization.
- > **Plan for Succession:** Succession planning is critical to maintaining a full, active, and dedicated board. As a member of the board departs, work with them to develop a strategy to recruit a new member to serve in their place. When thinking about recruiting new talent, examine any gaps your board may have. Think about what skills or expertise your board needs to be successful. Maybe the individual leaving the board worked for a law firm that donated pro bono legal counsel to your organization. If that is the case, work with him or her to recruit someone in the legal profession to fill that role. Members with legal, accounting, and finance qualifications and experience can be especially valuable to a nonprofit. Importantly, if the individual rolling off the board provided crucial financial support, either personally or through their company, be sure to recruit someone who can fill that need so your organization does not experience a gap in funding.
- > **Keep Board Alumni Engaged:** Consider how best to ensure your past board members continue to support your organization. Creating an honorary board, or engaging board alumni to lead or participate in initiatives, are good options to consider. Board members enjoy the prestige of sitting on an honorary board—they can keep their name tied to an organization without having any of the pesky giving or time commitments that full board membership requires. For your organization, this allows you to keep high-profile names connected and cultivated. Honorary boards can also serve as a resting place for board members who are no longer able to meet the requirements of full board participation. Or your past board member could be the ideal candidate to chair a campaign, champion a new program, or breathe life into an existing initiative. These are all great ways to engage former board members and keep them happy and involved. The goal is to have a conversation and determine the right path for each individual.

### Cole, Newton & Duran's Not-for-Profit Practice

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Cole, Newton & Duran's team of professionals are involved in every stage of our client's engagement to ensure they are receiving high quality, responsive service. Clients enjoy working with experts who help achieve their objectives. Clients receive industry knowledge and solutions they need to not only reach, but to exceed their strategic goals.

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### CONTINUED ENGAGEMENT IS ESSENTIAL

No matter what type of board transition you are tackling, remember the importance of continued engagement. Your board likely represents your organization's most loyal supporters. These individuals provide not only financial support, but also donate their time and expertise to ensure the organization's success. Don't let these individuals fade into the background. Keep former board members engaged, as you would any major donor or prospect. Regular stewardship through updates, calls, and meetings is key to maintaining close relationships and ensuring these individuals remain organizational champions and ambassadors.

### FAREWELL DOESN'T HAVE TO MEAN GOOD-BYE

No matter what type of board transition you are facing, these tips and strategies can help guide you through the process. Remember, it is important to maintain open communication with your board members to ensure you are doing what is best for both them and your organization.

*The preceding is an article by Lisa Keitges, director, and Ryan Grosso, senior associate director, at [Orr Associates, Inc.](#) (OAI). OAI is a strategic fundraising firm that leverages top talent and innovative technologies to help nonprofits grow and diversify revenue.*

### Contact Us

If you would like to discuss how Cole, Newton & Duran's not-for-profit team can help your organization with your accounting, tax, or consulting needs, please feel free to give me a call.

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