

Nonprofit Board Governance Checklist

Fingers out. Noses in.

PURPOSE OF THIS TOOL

- This checklist helps board members govern well.
- Use it to stay focused on oversight, strategy, and accountability.
- Use it to avoid micromanagement.
- Use it to prepare, participate, and reflect.

HOW TO USE THIS CHECKLIST

Use it in four ways.

- Before every board meeting
- During board meetings
- As an annual governance reset
- As a personal self-check

You do not need to answer every question every time. Pick the questions tied to the decisions on the table.

ANCHOR PRINCIPLE

Read this before every meeting.

- Your role is oversight, not operations.
- Fingers out of day-to-day work.
- Noses in strategy, risk, culture, and results.

If a question pulls you into execution, pause. Reframe it as a governance question.

BEFORE EVERY BOARD MEETING

Use this as meeting prep. Spend 10-15 minutes before you arrive.

Mission and Strategy

Ask yourself.

- ❑ Does this agenda move the mission forward?
- ❑ Which items require board judgment versus staff updates?
- ❑ Are we focused on priorities or reacting to noise?
- ❑ How does this align with the strategic plan?
- ❑ What success looks like in 6, 12, 24 months?

CEO and Leadership Oversight

Focus on support & accountability.

- ❑ Is the CEO supported and challenged?
- ❑ Are goals clear and measurable?
- ❑ Are we evaluating performance or managing tasks?
- ❑ What barriers need board backing, not board control?

Financial Stewardship

Think trends, not line items.

- ❑ Do I understand the financial story at a high level?
- ❑ Are revenues diversified and realistic?
- ❑ Are reserves adequate?
- ❑ What decisions require board approval?
- ❑ What questions clarify direction, not transactions?

Risk and Compliance

Protect the organization.

- ❑ What creates legal or reputational risk?
- ❑ Are policies current and followed?
- ❑ Any red flags in audits, HR, safety, or data?
- ❑ What risks are we accepting on purpose?

Fund development and relationships

Own the resource role.

- ❑ Is every board member clear on expectations?
- ❑ Are we building relationships or chasing dollars?
- ❑ Do we steward and thank donors well?
- ❑ Is 100 percent board giving met?

Equity and Impact

Govern with values.

- ❑ Who benefits from our decisions?
- ❑ Who is missing from the table or the data?
- ❑ Are outcomes tracked, not stories alone?
- ❑ Does governance reflect stated values?



DURING BOARD MEETINGS

Use this as a real-time filter.

Board Composition

- ❑ Do skills match strategy?
- ❑ Are terms enforced?
- ❑ Is officer and committee succession planned?
- ❑ Are new members onboarded well?

Committees

- ❑ Do charters exist and stay current?
- ❑ Is the focus oversight, not execution?
- ❑ Do committees bring recommendations?

Learning and Improvement

- ❑ Is there an annual board self-assessment?
- ❑ Is the CEO evaluated annually?
- ❑ Do we invest in governance learning?

ONGOING GOVERNANCE RESPONSIBILITIES

Review quarterly or annually.

Governance Discipline

Ask silently or out loud.

- ❑ Is this strategic?
- ❑ Are we drifting into staff work?
- ❑ Should this live with a committee or staff?
- ❑ Is a vote needed?

Board Culture

Model the standard.

- ❑ Are voices balanced?
- ❑ Is dissent welcomed?
- ❑ Are egos in check?
- ❑ Does this feel like the culture we want?

Decision Quality

Slow down when it matters.

- ❑ What data supports this?
- ❑ What assumptions are we making?
- ❑ What is the downside risk?
- ❑ What happens if we wait or do nothing?

REFLECTION ACTIVITIES

Use these in retreats, orientations, or personal reflection.

Personal Governance Check

Do this quarterly.

- ❑ Three ways I add the most value.
- ❑ Three ways I tend to overstep.

“Fingers out. Noses in.” Exercise

Do this in pairs or committees.

- ❑ Two examples of staff work to avoid.
- ❑ Two strategic questions to ask instead.
- ❑ Reframe one operational comment into a governance question.

Meeting Prep Reflection

Answer privately before each meeting.

- ❑ What decision matters most tonight?
- ❑ What question moves it forward?
- ❑ Where do I need to listen more than speak?

Annual Board Effectiveness

Discuss this once a year.

- ❑ What decisions did we avoid? Why?
- ❑ Where did we add real value?
- ❑ Where did we slow progress?
- ❑ What does stronger governance look like?

BOTTOM LINE

Strong boards govern.

They ask hard questions.

They stay out of the weeds.

They keep their noses in the work that matters most.