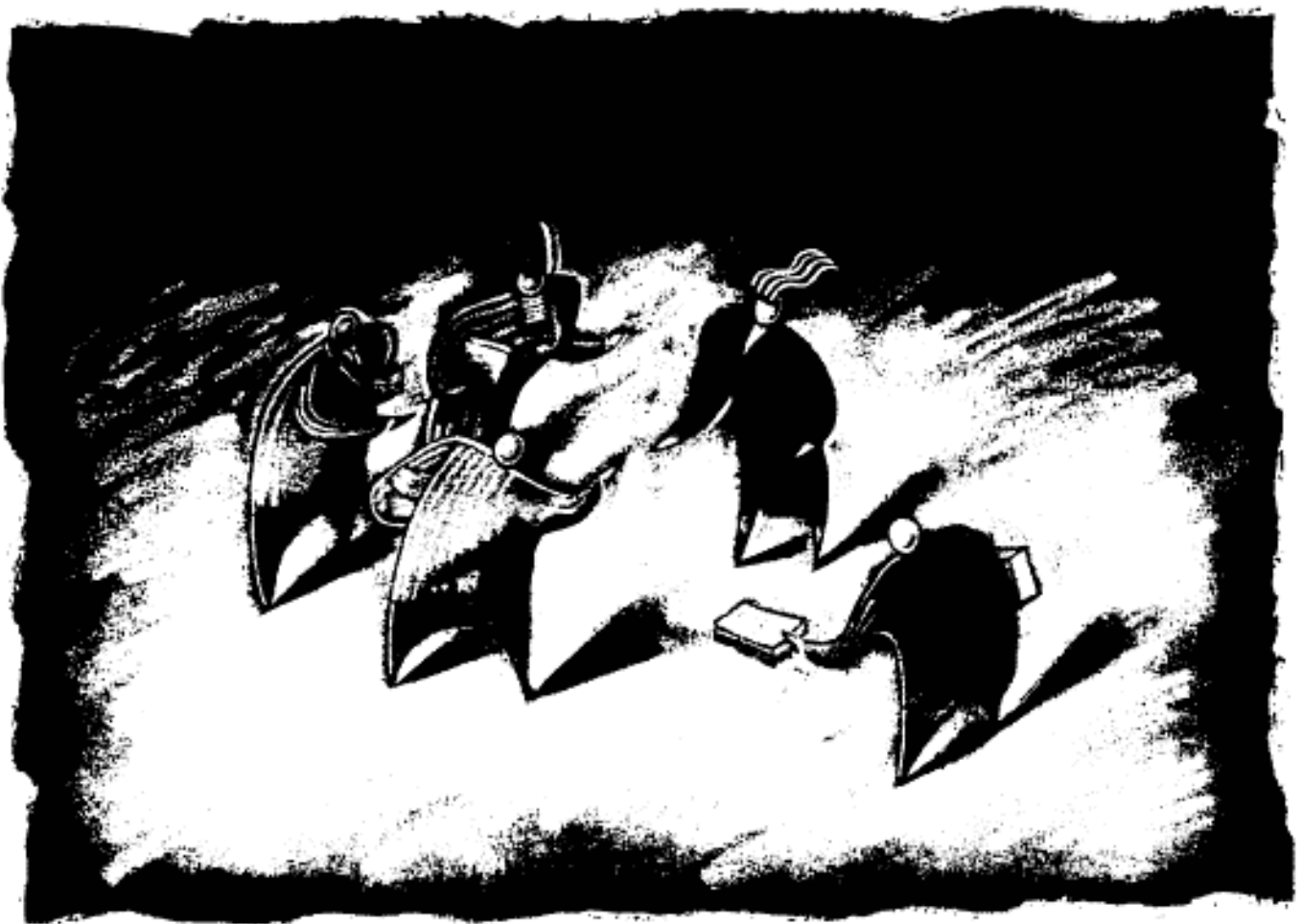


# Getting Oriented

*A Program for Orienting New Trustees  
Is An Indispensable Step for Foundations to Maximize the  
Value and Benefits of Their Boards*

By Carol Strauch



*This is the fourteenth in a series of "hands on" articles designed to help improve the management and performance of organizations in the philanthropic sector. Each aims to assist grantmakers and grantseekers alike in strengthening the skill and knowledge needed to perform effectively.*

A veteran foundation trustee recalls with a chuckle her introduction to the grantmaking world. “My welcome was a tuna-fish salad sandwich and a request to sit down to a working board situation. And as I was sitting there I was fast losing my self-esteem.” Adds another, “You come to the board room with an uneasiness, a mystique of ignorance, and you watch things play out. I remember my first meeting and thinking, what the heck’s my role here?”

Defining roles, helping new board members make an early contribution, and providing information on the foundation’s operations are all part of an important function that sometimes receives inadequate attention—board orientation. While some foundations see little turnover among trustees, others add several new people each year. New foundations find themselves facing the challenge of bringing a whole group up to working speed. And family foundations struggle to find a way to engage and train the next generation to carry on the family’s philanthropic tradition.

A good number of foundation trustees come on board to a more helpful introduction than that received by the two quoted above. The Council on Foundations’ 1990 Foundation Management Report finds that 60 percent of respondents orient new trustees in some way. Yet many foundation leaders feel they aren’t doing enough. “I know I should get started right after new trustees are elected,” says one busy executive director, “but as soon as the meeting ends we heave a sigh of relief and return to other matters that seem more pressing. Then along comes their first board meeting, and we find ourselves picking up the orientation piece at the last moment.”

Longtime trustee John Nason writes in his primer *Foundation Trusteeship*, “Conventional wisdom holds that trustees educate themselves, chiefly by attending meetings and listening to their seniors on the board. This is important, but wasteful of time and talent.” Nancy Axelrod, executive director of the National Center for Nonprofit Boards, agrees: “There is a tremendous need for board development in the nonprofit world. Too many individuals are carefully wooed and placed on boards only to be left to fend for themselves to decipher their role.” This situation can make it difficult for the board team, and hence the foundation itself, to function effectively.

Karl Mathiasen III, a consultant to nonprofits and trustee of the New World Foundation, notes that “While all board members need nurturing support if they are expected to carry out the work of the organization, new board members need that kind of support more than others. They need to be assured  
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that their views are really welcome, that there are no secrets and no rituals that are closed to them, and that they have been brought on be-cause of their qualities, skills and abilities.”

### *Roles and Responsibilities*

Most new trustees have much to learn. In some areas they will borrow on experience gained while serving other nonprofits; other duties are unique to grantmaking foundations. Not all subjects can be “taught” in an orientation session, but such a program can outline what knowledge and skills newcomers will need in order to make the most effective contribution.

A new board member needs to know the foundation’s history, including the donor’s interests, which often guide a foundation’s programs. Whether donor-influenced or not, the foundation’s values, funding and program goals are essential knowledge. “Trustees should be encouraged to look at the big picture,” says Jonathan Cook, executive director of the Support Centers of America. “Start them thinking about the organization’s strengths, and its most serious problems.” Foundation work can be complex. “The orientation really opened my eyes,” recalls David Hatfield, board member of the Kalamazoo Foundation. “It gave me a better understanding of the less visible activities of the foundation.”

Nuts and bolts matters, such as trustees’ legal obligations, should be spelled out, as well as fiduciary duties. Trustees should thoroughly understand any policies that affect their service—conflict of interest, compensation, use of directors and officers liability insurance. They should be told how the foundation’s endowment is invested, and how its financial operations are managed. Community foundation board members will need to know what types of funds are accepted and encouraged, how annual operating expenses are met, and exactly how much fundraising—or contributing—is expected of them.

Some observers caution that formal orientations often inundate individuals with information about the organization and skip lightly, if at all, over the role of the board. According to Cook, “Clearly defining what is expected of whom is crucial. Role confusion is one of the biggest sources of lost energy and distress in nonprofits.” Areas to be ironed out include whether the board is a policymaking body, a grant-reviewing body, or some combination; the role staff plays in relation to the board; and even whether the board and staff have explicit, up-to-date job descriptions.

Individual board members will be assigned roles as well. Each will be required to devote some specific time and talent to the board, and this should be discussed at the outset—noting how these assignments relate to the contributions of other board members. Newcomers will

appreciate knowing the background, interests, and talents of their fellow trustees.

### ***The Unwritten Rules***

Every foundation also has certain “cultural norms” that should be discussed. For example, explains Marion Et-zwiler, president of the Minneapolis Foundation, “Our staff never experiences pressure from board members about individual proposals that come in—it’s an unwritten ethic. During orientation, our staff and veteran board members emphasize this during a conflict of interest discussion.” Orientation can also be the time to encourage new board members to ask questions, listen carefully, speak up, and participate in “constructive disagreement” during board meetings.

New trustees will also appreciate hearing how foundations differ from other nonprofits, or from individual philanthropy. “Foundation trusteeship has a dual character,” writes John Nason. “On the one hand, it is responsible for the distribution of private money for purposes designated by the donor; on the other hand, it is an exercise in public responsibility for the good of society.”

Hazards should be pointed out as well, including the emotional stress of saying “no” to so many worthy programs and people, or the fact that stakeholders will provide little direct criticism, so foundation trustees must be willing to invite it. And, the new trustee should be warned against the arrogance and paternalism that can afflict the unwary in the grantmaking field.

Board orientation really begins during the nominations process, when potential candidates are given a brief synopsis of the foundation’s mission and operations, as well as the time commitment and duties expected of board members. Expectations should be clearly outlined at this point, something which is often forgotten in the rush to confirm quality candidates. After election, the board chair plays the part of welcomer. Gwen Jackson, chair of the Milwaukee Foundation, sends new people a welcome letter, inviting them to come in at their convenience to sit down with her and other members of the board, especially the distribution committee chair, to go through what the foundation is all about.

“It’s situational,” says Jonathan Cook, “but it is very useful for teambuilding and motivation to have senior board members take as much of a lead as possible.” Staff should participate as well: board members can explain the vision of the foundation,

while the CEO can present the organization’s strengths and problems. New World’s Karl Mathiasen adds that veteran board members should be asked to describe why they are members of that board and willing to give service to it when they could be at home or serving in a volunteer capacity elsewhere. “If senior board members speak personally and from the heart it can be moving—new board members will then feel included in the circle.” At the Milwaukee Foundation, adds Jackson, “We try to have a very friendly conversation giving the new people our insights. We try hard to make them feel really comfortable.”

While this kind of discussion can happen at a regularly scheduled board meeting, a better alternative is the separate orientation session, where new members have a chance to ask questions. Charles Mais, board member of the El Paso Foundation, remembers his session appreciatively. “There was a formal program, and people from the board talked with us about our responsibilities. I received a schedule of foundation and board activities and a whole packet to review.”

### ***Handouts and Homework***

Choosing what to include in such a session is a challenge, since piling on too much information can be self-defeating. David Hatfield found most helpful the material Kalamazoo’s executive director provided him about the foundation’s most pressing issues. In general, a two-hour or half-day session that concentrates on the board’s role, individual responsibilities, and essential facts about the foundation is sufficient. Foundation staff or board members can also prepare a board manual for newcomers (see below).

Trustees can use this reference throughout their terms, and participants in the orientation can refer to it during the session (although session leaders are discouraged from going through each item in any great detail at that time). Educational video is making spot appearances in foundation boardrooms; special readings can provide insight into trends in philanthropy, community needs, or trends in the program areas the foundation funds. Henry Doll, executive director of the Nord Family Foundation, obtained copies of John Nason’s *Foundation Trusteeship* and the writings of Robert Greenleaf (“Trustees as Servants,” for example) to help board members consider the special character of foundation stewardship. (Many foundations provide their trustees with subscriptions to *Foundation News* magazine for these purposes, too.)

Other training techniques work well, too. At some early point, it is useful for team building to have new and senior board members meet on a more casual, social

basis. Some foundations team up new members with veterans who serve as mentors, or at least as hosts for the first few meetings. Gwen Jackson suggests a twist to this “buddy” system—asking just-retiring board members to serve as hosts for a short time. “The new people receive special attention and the benefit of experienced insight; the outgoing people make a valuable contribution while easing their way out of the foundation’s mainstream,” she says.

Giving new trustees a working assignment early on also increases their commitment and contributes to their sense of belonging. For example, new Minneapolis Foundation board members are often assigned to one of several advisory committees for specific funding areas. This gives them experience in proposal review and enables them to establish working relationships with their board colleagues and the non-board, community members of the committees that are such an important part of the foundation’s work.

The new trustee’s first board meeting is another time for concentrated learning. Good pre-meeting orientation should alert new board members to issues that will be raised and give background on various programs. Senior members can also encourage newcomers to ask questions—even simple ones. Says Mary Frances Winters, board member of the Rochester (New York) Area Foundation, “If you’re new, sometimes you don’t want to ask a question in a board meeting, because you think ‘everybody else knows this, and I’m the only one who doesn’t because I’m new.’ But I’ve found it’s good to ask questions; it helps the other board members realize they shouldn’t be using acronyms or jargon, and that it’s important for the new board members to understand where we are.”

New board members can also provide insights. Barbara Portee, president of the Bert and Mary Meyer Foundation, says that in setting up her family’s foundation, “We purposely chose board members who could teach *us*.” Since Meyer funds rural community organizations working for progressive change in the southeastern U.S., Portee looks for board members - ‘who know and are accountable to the communities we fund. Our programs are guided and enriched by their experience.”

### ***Family Foundations***

While family foundations use many of the same techniques as other foundations, orienting new family members is often a longer, more involved process that

begins even before the next generation is ready to join the board. (See “Passing the Torch,” *Foundation News*, September/October 1989.) Eloise Meadows Rouse, trustee of the Meadows Foundation, describes a challenge faced by many families: “Our generation grew up together, and worked together on the foundation from the time our uncle died and left its operation in our hands. Our children don’t know their cousins as well, as they live all over the country. They have to get to know both the foundation and each other!” Sometimes it’s difficult for the younger generation to afford the time—and, possibly, the expense—required to work on foundation activities.

To address these concerns, last year Meadows Foundation officials invited the next generation to an expenses-paid meeting, offering the opportunity to learn more about the family’s philanthropic heritage and the foundation’s operations. The orientation included a session where participants learned about the history, legal requirements, administration, and programs funded by the foundation. Then, for two days the newcomers sat in on the full board meeting and went on site visits. Afterwards, the young people were assigned to grant subcommittees, and were invited to a second meeting which included sessions, led by current board members, where they worked through case studies of grant proposals. Meadows family members agree that this extended orientation process has helped the next generation develop a common bond that translates into effective leadership, and “ownership,” of the foundation.

Thinking in similar terms, the Nord Family Foundation recently sponsored a large family gathering where, with the help of a facilitator, attendees of all ages worked on re-defining the foundation’s mission.

“The family feels they were orienting the youngest kids to philanthropy at the same time they were exploring new directions for the foundation,” says Henry Doll. Barbara Portee of the Meyer foundation adds that she and her executive director intend to make a presentation, aimed at drumming up interest in future participation, at her family’s reunion this summer.

### **Family Foundations**

And what about “orientation” beyond the basics, or after the initiation period is over? There are a number of conferences sponsored by regional associations, the Council on Foundations, or affinity groups of grantmakers; often the most valuable part of attending the meeting is the opportunity to “network” with other trustees.

Another technique, writes John Nason, is the special board meeting “devoted entirely to a broad review of

foundation policies, assessment of successes and failures, and survey of new needs and opportunities. This can be a regularly scheduled board meeting, but one at which official business will not be conducted, or a special retreat where the setting and time allow more relaxed discussion."

"It helps to consider the various views of board development," says the Support Center's Jonathan Cook. "Some board members feel they don't want to take the time for 'training,' or 'orientation' per se. It pays to make the educational opportunity more useful to them—for instance, make it part of a planning meeting that might be of more interest and help to them." Experts could be brought in to help the board discuss an important issue, such as multiculturalism as it affects the foundation; to explore new opportunities in a particular funding area; or to learn more about technical areas such as investment oversight.

The Marion I. and Henry J. Knott Foundation requires new trustees to accompany their senior

counterparts on site visits as part of an extensive training program. According to administrator Ann Von Lossberg, Knott board members regularly go on site visits and are actively involved in the foundation's day-to-day activities, so up-and-coming board members gain close-up experience in what will be expected of them once they join the board. Often such firsthand knowledge enlivens board meetings and increases the members' enthusiasm and commitment.

Many applaud the variety of educational opportunities being offered today but wish more trustees would take advantage of them. The Council on Foundations *1990 Management Report* finds that of the responding foundations—most of which provide an initial orientation—less than half provide an ongoing board education. Warns Kalamazoo director Jack Hopkins, "If we fail to pay attention to learning, we risk becoming less imaginative, and less inclusive, in our activities." With so many opportunities available today to help foundation boards be at their best, why take that risk?

## **A BOARD HANDBOOK SAMPLER**

A handbook can serve as a useful reference throughout a trustee's tenure. Worth including:

### **Board Membership and Calendar**

- ? List of board members (names, addresses, affiliations, short)
- ? Job description of board chair and members
- ? Committee lists (include member names, addresses of non-board members) and brief stated purpose of each committee
- ? Calendar of board, committee meetings, and other meetings or functions to be attended by board members

### **Foundation Background Information**

- ? Mission statement
- ? Short history, including how the foundation was established, and program milestones
- ? Description of grantmaking process, from proposal stage through board decision process and post-grant evaluation
- ? Long - range plan
- ? Copy of most-recent annual report
- ? Organizational chart of staff, board relationships

### **Bylaws and Policies**

- ? Articles of incorporation and bylaws, or trust instrument
- ? Board policies on indemnification/directors and officers liability

insurance, conflict of interest, board training opportunities including information on associations to which the foundation belongs) attendance at meetings, reimbursement for expenses, other compensation

### **Staff**

- ? Staff list with titles, short biographies of key staff
- ? Job descriptions of key staff
- ? Personnel policies, including performance appraisal process

### **Finance**

- ? Investment policy and recent reports from investment managers
- ? Budget
- ? Most recent audit statement
- ? Financial procedures
- ? Description of public support test (for community and public foundations)
- ? Types of funds, planned giving, other contributions (for community and public foundations)

### **Minutes and Issues**

- ? Minutes of recent board meetings
- ? Description of current issues up for discussion