



**BOYS & GIRLS CLUBS
OF AMERICA**

BLUEPRINT FOR BOARD ENGAGEMENT

BUILDING & SUSTAINING EFFECTIVE BOARDS





For 165 years, the Boys & Girls Club Movement has been evolving, and the pace of change is faster than ever. To continue delivering life-changing outcomes for youth, we must do more than keep up—**we must lead the way.**

We know that strong, engaged boards and capable leadership are essential for a high-quality Club Experience. However, until now, there has been a lack of research identifying the specific board practices that truly drive organizational excellence.

That's why Boys & Girls Clubs of America (BGCA) partnered with Lumen Guidance & Consultation to conduct a national qualitative study to answer a critical question: What board practices lead to high-performing Boys & Girls Clubs?

The findings from this study informed the creation of the **Blueprint for Board Engagement**, a practical, research-based guide designed to:

- **Strengthen** board effectiveness.
- **Enhance** organizational performance.
- **Improve** outcomes for the youth we serve.

As board members, your leadership is essential to the success of your Club and the Movement as a whole. This Blueprint is a tool to help you lead with clarity, confidence and impact.

Thank you for your continued commitment to our mission and to the youth we serve.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lorraine".

Lorraine Orr

Executive Vice President and Chief Operations Officer
Boys & Girls Clubs of America



Key Findings

Intentionality in Board Practices

The evaluation of board practices identifies board-level structures and practices that contribute to the effectiveness and performance of top-performing Boys & Girls Club (BGC) organizations. Through interviews with CEOs and board members from 20 high-performing Clubs, a clear theme emerged: **intentionality**.

The boards of top-performing Clubs don't follow a single formula, but share a commitment to intentional, adaptive governance. Four core themes emerged:

These practices were not uniformly applied; instead, they were thoughtfully implemented to meet each organization's unique challenges and opportunities.

In every area, effective boards were found to be deliberate in aligning their practices with organizational needs. These boards strategically leverage members' time, expertise and resources, and they remain adaptable to the evolving needs of their youth, staff and communities.

While there is no universal formula for board effectiveness, top-performing organizations intentionally:

- Prioritize the mission.
- Foster strong, trusting relationships through regular personal connection.
- Communicate openly and consistently.
- Tailor their strategies to local context and capacity.



Strategic Recruitment

Align board composition with organizational needs and community demographics.



Meaningful Engagement

Set clear expectations and offer purposeful roles.



Strong CEO-Board Relationships

Foster trust, transparency, and shared accountability



Tailored Governance

Adapt structures to fit organizational size, budget, and context.



High Impact Board Practices



BOARD DEVELOPMENT: Strategic Recruitment and Engagement

High-performing organizations approach board development with intentionality and strategic foresight. They understand that a strong board is a strategic asset and build their teams with purpose.

RECRUIT WITH PURPOSE

Strategic recruitment efforts align with both current and future organizational needs. Top-performing Clubs leverage a board matrix to identify gaps in skills, experience and perspectives, and to build diverse boards across demographics, professional backgrounds and lived experiences. This approach ensures broader insights and stronger community alignment, as diverse boards are better positioned to make informed decisions and effectively serve their communities.

VET FOR FIT

Candidate evaluation goes beyond credentials. Leading organizations prioritize individuals who are mission-aligned, self-motivated and well-connected within their communities. A thorough vetting process ensures a mutual fit, with open dialogue about expectations and the realities of board service.

RIGHT-SIZE THE BOARD

While board size varies, most organizations maintain 20 to 30 members, adjusting as needed to support strategic initiatives such as capital campaigns. Governance is typically overseen by a dedicated Board Governance Committee, which leads recruitment, onboarding, retention and accountability efforts to ensure the board remains effective, engaged and aligned with the organization's mission.

ONBOARD FOR SUCCESS

Clear expectations are set early through structured onboarding processes. Many boards implement mentorship programs—such as “Board Buddies”—and provide comprehensive orientation materials, Club tours and introductions to staff and members. This fosters early engagement and a sense of belonging, ensuring new members can quickly contribute to the board's success.

We engage in two-way conversations to determine alignment—what the candidate is seeking and what board service entails at our Club.



PERFORMANCE & ACCOUNTABILITY: Strengthening Board Impact

High-performing boards are grounded in clear, consistently communicated expectations that begin with recruitment and are reinforced through annual renewals.

SET CLEAR EXPECTATIONS

Many boards formalize commitments through bylaws, board agreements and annual performance plans. These tools are introduced during onboarding and are revisited during regular check-ins. Some boards even include clear accountability measures, like automatic resignation after repeated absences, to uphold standards and ensure a high level of commitment. As one board member noted, “We want people who want to be involved. Setting expectations early helps sustain a high level of commitment year after year.”

FOSTER A CULTURE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

A culture of shared responsibility is essential for board success. Boards foster this peer accountability by:

- Sharing performance metrics.
- Recognizing contributions publicly.
- Encouraging members to lead by example.

IMPLEMENT ACCOUNTABILITY TOOLS

Boards support accountability by blending structured tools—such as scorecards, self-assessments and annual reviews—with human-centered practices. This approach recognizes that contributions can vary and not all impact is quantifiable.

ADDRESS UNDERPERFORMANCE

When expectations fall short, boards often take a tiered approach, balancing accountability with empathy. This starts with personal outreach by the board or governance chair. If necessary, it may lead to offering “soft exits” or transitions to advisory roles.

We transitioned (select board members) into an emeritus role, allowing them to remain engaged as advisors. This preserved relationships and maintained access to their networks and support without requiring formal board participation.



TERMS, TENURES and TRANSITIONS: A Framework for Sustained Impact

Effective boards take a deliberate approach to terms, renewals and leadership succession to ensure strong governance and sustained organizational impact. Common practices include:

BALANCE EXPERIENCE WITH FRESH PERSPECTIVES:

To maintain continuity and avoid large-scale turnover, staggered terms are widely used. This ensures a blend of experienced members and fresh perspectives at all times.

PLAN FOR SUCCESSION:

Board leaders are typically selected based on demonstrated commitment, leadership ability and alignment with the mission. Succession is often supported through structured pipelines, including committee leadership, vice-chair roles and advisory groups for emerging leaders.

DEFINE TERM LIMITS AND RENEWALS:

Most boards adopt two- or three-year terms, often with a cap (e.g., two terms). Extensions may be granted for members in leadership roles or to retain critical institutional knowledge. Some boards require a “roll-off” period between terms to promote renewal and avoid stagnation.

PROVIDE SOFT LANDINGS:

To preserve engagement and institutional memory, many boards offer transitional roles—such as emeritus, honorary or advisory positions—for members completing their service. Boards are intentional about these roles—ensuring each has a clear purpose and members are actively stewarded as supporters and advocates of the organization.

These strategies collectively support board effectiveness, leadership continuity and long-term organizational resilience.



BOARD MEMBER ENGAGEMENT: Driving Engagement Through Mission-Driven Leadership

High-performing organizations cultivate strong board engagement by meaningfully involving members in governance, strategic direction and mission delivery. Board members are not only aligned with the organization's purpose—they are emotionally invested, contributing their time, expertise and resources to advance the mission's impact.

ENCOURAGE HANDS-ON INVOLVEMENT

Engagement is sustained through direct connection to the mission. Members stay informed with regular updates, newsletters and “Mission Moments” shared during meetings. Many deepen their involvement by volunteering at Clubs, attending events, leading tours and participating in safety assessments.

We connect board work to the mission. It's not busy work—we want members to meet the kids and see the impact of their time and investment.

CREATE A FUN, INCLUSIVE CULTURE

A positive, inclusive culture plays a critical role in fostering engagement. Social gatherings, often hosted in members' homes, build camaraderie and a sense of community. Meetings are designed to be welcoming and energizing, featuring food, fellowship, and stories of impact.

It doesn't feel like work—it's spending time with friends while doing good.

RECOGNIZE AND CELEBRATE BOARD MEMBERS

Personal relationships are foundational to engagement. CEOs and board chairs invest in getting to know members individually, recognizing milestones and celebrating achievements. One CEO shared, “We use Google alerts to stay updated on board members' successes so we can be the first to congratulate them.” Recognition is intentional, through awards, leadership opportunities and meaningful committee roles.

MAINTAIN OPEN, CONSISTENT COMMUNICATION

Finally, transparency and respect for members' time are essential. Organizations share performance data openly and maintain informal touchpoints through calls, texts, and casual meetups. Meetings and events are scheduled well in advance to encourage participation and demonstrate respect for members' commitments.



STRATEGIC PLANNING: Aligning Vision with Impact

Participants from high-performing organizations consistently emphasized the importance of anchoring all decisions—whether setting priorities, expanding services or engaging donors—in our shared mission to serve youth. A forward-looking, data-informed strategic plan is essential to achieving this.

MISSION-DRIVEN DECISION MAKING

Boards that consistently ask, “What’s best for the kids?” are better positioned to make bold, youth-centered decisions, such as expanding services or pursuing strategic partnerships and merger opportunities. Successful organizations prioritize long-term goals over short-term improvisation, this approach ensures sustained impact and organizational resilience.

“What’s best for the kids?”

COLLABORATIVE GOAL SETTING

Effective strategic planning involves input from staff, board members, youth, and community stakeholders. Resources like BGCA’s Future Ready Strategic Direction help identify needs and opportunities, and align efforts with Movement priorities.

ANNUAL STRATEGIC RETREATS

Many organizations host annual retreats to review past performance, set growth and financial goals, assign board roles and align committee work with strategic objectives. These sessions foster accountability and clarity.

BUILD A DATA-DRIVEN CULTURE

Boards are increasingly embedding data into decision-making. Some organizations have dedicated staff for data analysis and visualization, ensuring key metrics—such as NYOI results, KPIs and annual reports—are reviewed regularly and meaningfully.

ALIGN WITH THE BGCA MOVEMENT

Boards that engage in area councils, state alliances and Boys & Girls Club conferences are better equipped to align local strategies with the Movement’s broader direction, ensuring consistency and shared impact.



BOARD STRUCTURES & PRACTICES: Committee Effectiveness

Participants emphasized that a board's most important work is accomplished at the committee level. Common committees include Finance, Executive, Governance, Safety, Resource Development, Programs/Impact, and Operations. Boards also establish ad hoc committees for specific needs like events, advocacy, or capital projects.

To ensure committees are effective, high-performing boards follow these key practices:

- **Clear goals and accountability:** Each committee operates with defined objectives that align with the strategic plan and regularly reviews its progress.
- **Strategic alignment:** Members are assigned based on their expertise and interests, with the flexibility to be reassigned as needed.
- **Right-sized participation:** Committees are structured to ensure engagement without overextension.
- **Staff integration:** Executive staff contribute their expertise while board members maintain leadership roles.
- **External expertise:** Non-board members may be invited to contribute specialized knowledge.

Committees are regularly evaluated and restructured to reflect evolving organizational priorities.

LEVERAGE THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

The Executive Committee plays a pivotal role in governance, often addressing time-sensitive or complex issues before full board meetings. These sessions are used for strategic dialogue, not just agenda previews. Transparency is emphasized, with recommendations or decisions communicated clearly and, when appropriate, ratified by the full board to maintain trust and inclusiveness.

RUN EFFECTIVE BOARD MEETINGS

High-performing boards typically meet six to 12 times annually, with a strong focus on forward-looking strategy and decision-making. Best practices include:

- **Strategic Agendas:** These are developed collaboratively by the CEO and board chair.
- **Consent Agendas:** Used to streamline routine approvals and maximize time for substantive discussion.
- **Preparedness:** Board members are expected to review materials in advance.

- **Staff Engagement:** Senior staff participate to provide insights and support decision-making.
- **Mission Moments:** Brief, inspiring stories that reinforce the organization's impact and energize the board.

INTEGRATE AND SUPPORT STAFF

Strong collaboration between the board, CEO, and staff is a hallmark of high-performing organizations. While roles are clearly defined, the partnership is dynamic. Board members also engage directly with staff through mentorship, project based support, and committee collaboration.

CLARIFY ROLES AND BOUNDARIES

To maintain clarity, organizations use tools like decision matrices ("Who Decides?") and reinforce boundaries through onboarding and ongoing dialogue. CEOs are empowered to lead with autonomy, supported by formal evaluations and ongoing feedback. Frequent communication between the CEO and board chair ensures strategic cohesion, and board members act as thought partners and advisors to key initiatives.



BUILD EFFECTIVE BOARD RELATIONSHIPS: Communicate with Impact and Transparency

Strong, trust-based relationships between board members, the CEO and staff are critical to organizational performance. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of trust, engagement and shared commitment to the Movement. These qualities are cultivated through intentional relationship-building and form the foundation of a healthy organizational culture.

BUILD POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

A recurring theme was the value of regular, personal engagement. Many CEOs and board leaders prioritize one-on-one conversations with board members outside of formal meetings several times a year. These interactions build trust and mutual respect, making board meetings more productive and enjoyable. They also serve as a key motivator for board members, who often appreciate the networking and connection opportunities. While organizations in smaller, close-knit communities may find relationship-building easier, universal practices—such as consistent communication and active listening—can foster strong relationships in any setting.

ENCOURAGE FEEDBACK AND TRANSPARENCY

CEOs who are open about organizational challenges enable the board to contribute meaningfully. Informal conversations often make complex issues more approachable and constructive. Boards also benefit from regular feedback mechanisms, including annual board member reviews, board assessments, surveys and informal check-ins. These help improve board operations and organizational effectiveness.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION PRACTICES

Participants highlighted several communication strategies that help boards navigate challenges while maintaining strong relationships:

- **Pre-Meeting Conversations:** Before addressing sensitive topics, CEOs and board leaders often engage key members in one-on-one discussions. These conversations allow concerns to surface early and help preserve trust during difficult decisions.
- **Tailored Updates:** Email newsletters and personalized communication keep board members informed and engaged. CEOs often adjust the frequency and depth of updates to match board preferences.



RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT: Strategic Role of the Board

Board engagement is pivotal to sustainable fundraising. High-performing organizations leverage board leadership to build credibility, deepen donor relationships and diversify revenue.

RELATIONSHIP-BASED FUNDRAISING

Leading organizations prioritize long-term relationships over transactional giving. They create fewer, high-impact events to foster meaningful donor experiences while reducing costs. Personalized stewardship, such as tailored outreach, handwritten notes, and donor site visits, strengthens loyalty and increases giving over time.

STAFF COLLABORATION

Fundraising success is driven by close collaboration between board members and development staff. Board members open doors, and staff manage the follow-through. Some organizations formalize this partnership by assigning donor portfolios to board members, with staff providing support throughout the cultivation cycle.

LEVERAGE BOARD MEMBER RESOURCES

Board members contribute more than governance—they bring access to networks, corporate sponsorships, and in-kind resources. High-capacity and emeritus members often open doors to high-value donor networks, significantly enhancing fundraising efforts.

BUILD COMMUNITY CREDIBILITY

Consistent, visible engagement in the community—without always making an ask—builds goodwill and strengthens the organization's reputation. This credibility enhances future fundraising efforts and positions the organization as a trusted community partner.

DIVERSIFY REVENUE STREAMS

Financial resilience comes from a balanced mix of funding sources. High-performing organizations cultivate diverse revenue streams from many sources, including endowments, legacy gifts, capital campaigns, grants, government support, in-kind contributions, individual and major gifts. Diversification reduces risk and ensures long-term sustainability.



LEVERAGE BGCA RESOURCES FOR BOARD EXCELLENCE

High-performing organizations distinguish themselves by fully engaging their boards in regional and national activities and aligning with the Movement's strategic direction. These organizations leverage BGCA's extensive network and resources to elevate board performance, accountability and impact.

RECOGNITION AND ENGAGEMENT

BGCA provides valuable opportunities to recognize and engage board members. Honors like the League of Eagles, Board Member of the Year, and Service to Youth Awards celebrate and reinforce board excellence. Participation in BGCA conferences and Area Council meetings offers board members valuable opportunities to connect with peers, share insights, and engage directly with BGCA leadership.

SUPPORT AND EXPERTISE

Top-performing organizations utilize the strategic support and expertise available from BGCA. Directors of Organizational Development (DODs) and BGCA subject matter experts—including those in Resource Development, Government Relations, and Safety—provide critical support. These organizations often invite DODs to board meetings and retreats to assist with onboarding, training and strategic planning. Ongoing communication with DODs ensures alignment and accountability.

TRAINING AND TOOLS

BGCA offers a suite of training and governance tools to strengthen boards. Targeted training through Spillet Leadership University (SLU) and virtual Board Academies equips board members with essential knowledge in areas like strategic planning, data-driven decision-making, nonprofit finance, and fundraising. Tools like BGCAboards.org, Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and the Standards of Organizational Effectiveness (SOEs) further strengthen governance and strategic alignment.



Appendix

RESEARCH METHODS

Boys & Girls Clubs of America (BGCA), in partnership with Lumen Consulting, identified 20 top-performing organizations based on a comprehensive performance score. To calculate this score, organizations received points for their performance across multiple factors, including:

- Growth over the past five years (e.g., in registered members, average daily attendance, and financial indicators like total income and individual giving)
- Staff and CEO turnover over the past five years
- Compliance measures
- 2024 overall Club Experience

For each factor, scores were adjusted based on organizational size when appropriate.

CEOs from the identified organizations were then asked to recommend a board member, typically the current board chair, to participate in a one-hour virtual interview. The interviews followed a semi-structured protocol developed from a review of existing research literature and guidance from BGCA staff experienced in supporting Boys & Girls Club boards. Participants were informed that their responses would remain confidential before the start of the interview.

Thematic analysis was used to identify themes across participants' responses (Braun & Clarke, 2012¹). Specifically, interview transcripts were reviewed, and an initial codebook was developed. Three team members at Lumen Guidance & Consultation coded a selection of interviews to refine the codebook and establish inter-rater reliability ("good agreement" (Cohen's Kappa > 0.6) was achieved across the three coders; Cicchetti, 1994²). Codes were then analyzed to identify relevant themes represented in the data.

¹ Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper, P. M. Camic, D. L. Long, A. T. Panter, D. Rindskopf, & K. J. Sher (Eds.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology: Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological*. (Vol. 2, pp. 57–71). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/13620-004>

² Cicchetti, D. V. (1994). Guidelines, criteria, and rules of thumb for evaluating normed and standardized assessment instruments in psychology. *Psychological Assessment*, 6(4), 284–290. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1040-3590.6.4.284>



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