

## Volunteer Boards: Don't Reinvent the Wheel!

**Volunteer Boards (VBs) face unique challenges.** They include:



1. They receive no stipend, nor compensation for their time or travel

2. They are asked to make (sometimes significant) financial contributions to the organization as a condition of membership

3. They may not have the right skills or experience, but are passionate about the mission and want to help

4. The quality of their contributions (except for their financial giving) is typically not assessed. There are no consequences for exceptionally good or bad performance

5. They are hard to fire!

Turnover on Volunteer Boards (VBs) is a fact of life. Whether by design (term limits) or attrition, there is often churn in VB membership. Other articles in this series have provided insights on recruiting and onboarding new members. This article focuses on maintaining the “tribal wisdom” of the group over time.

What do outgoing board members know? What lessons have they learned? What best practices have they created? What relationships have they cultivated during their time on the Board? These questions should be integrated into an “exit interview” process with every outgoing VB member. While these are excellent questions to ask while members are active (the subject of another article), they can be particularly powerful because outgoing members have less to lose by being candid.

The next challenge becomes how to disseminate and store the information once it has been obtained. There is nothing so frustrating as “reinventing the wheel”; making the same mistake an earlier VB member did because the learning was not available to others. We suggest the following as a starting point for a conversation with your Board:

1. Create a **simple**, one side of one piece of paper (or even better, electronic) form for VB members to use when they stumble across a best practice or lesson learned. If it is easy to use, it will be. If it is a burden, it won't.
2. Create a **simple** categorization scheme for the learning. Best Practices and Lessons Learned is simple and powerful. Another scheme includes “People/ Processes/ Technology/ Environmental Factors/ Measures and Metrics” (those with a process improvement background might recognize these as categories used to label the “bones” of a “Fishbone Diagram”). Customize these to your organization.
3. Store them in an **easy to access** location. A shared folder on Google Drive, Microsoft OneDrive, Dropbox, or the equivalent works well for many organizations. Those organizations with ERP

systems might take advantage of modules already designed with this purpose in mind.

4. **Remind** people to access them. Tools in a toolbox don't help until they are used. A quarterly(?) tickler embedded in meeting minutes can help keep the existence, and benefits of, contributing to and accessing the learning.
5. **Celebrate** the VB members who contribute their knowledge. **Celebrate even more** those who access those learnings, adapt them as appropriate, and put them into practice. This is where the "return on knowledge invested" occurs.

We hope this article is a catalyst for a larger conversation about this topic as well as other challenges facing Volunteer Boards. Please "comment" with your thoughts. Other articles in the series can be found on LinkedIn **#VolunteerBoards** or at [www.larrysolow.com](http://www.larrysolow.com).

Written by Larry Solow