

Mentoring is incredibly beneficial in professional settings to provide guidance, share knowledge, develop skills, and forge strong relationships. The board table provides a great opportunity to build mentorship practices as members are brought in from different sectors, at different stages of their careers, and with different lived experiences. At the same time, seasoned board members are well-positioned to orient new members, foster a sense of support and belonging, create a positive board culture, and set them up for success within the current organization and in future leadership opportunities.

This resource is a guide for boards interested in designing rewarding mentorship opportunities that fosters an inclusive and effective board dynamic.



Mentoring is a powerful tool for board education because it engages people and harnesses the individual and collective power of the board. It has the added advantage of facilitating more trusting and meaningful board member relationships, building board cohesion, and ultimately contributing to the level of shared understanding that promotes more informed decision-making.



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Types of Mentoring Opportunities

Depending on your board’s capacity and culture, you can choose to implement an informal mentoring initiative or a formal mentoring program for new board members.

	Informal Mentoring Initiative	Formal Mentoring Program
Structure & goals	Minimal structure is applied; goals are ad hoc and/or high-level. The mentoring relationship may develop organically, or new board members may be assigned a ‘board buddy’. The board may take on a mentoring approach within its culture.	Structured programs with clear goals, intentional matching between mentors and mentees and formalized mentoring relationships. Such programs embed a mentoring value set and approach within the board culture.
Oversight & Monitoring	There is minimal oversight and no official relationship monitoring or progress tracking. Results and outcomes are not reported back to the Board Chair in any official capacity.	Formal programs are led by the Board Chair or boards can select a Mentoring Lead to oversee the mentoring program and mentoring matches - An established relationship monitoring process is created so that progress can be effectively recorded and reported back to the Board Chair or Mentoring Lead. Through monitoring, the Board Chair or Mentoring Lead can offer support to help optimize the mentoring relationship as needed.
Length & Frequency	There is no set length for the mentoring relationships. Instead, mentor and mentee can continue the relationship as long as they deem necessary. A general meeting cadence is recommended so that the mentor relationship does not fizzle out.	There is a predetermined length for the mentoring relationship with start and end dates that are set upon initiation of the program. Programs have formal expectations about the frequency and length of the meetings between mentors and mentees. A formal closure meeting is held to recognize the ending of the program.

Whether you opt for an informal initiative or a formal program, both approaches nurture growth and connection between individuals.

How to set up mentorship opportunities on your board:

Creating a mentorship program requires some thought and effort, so it's important to gauge your board's capacity each step of the way. You may wish to begin with a more informal mentoring initiative and adjust as you receive feedback from both mentors and mentees. You may also find that informal mentoring opportunities are better suited to your context than a formal program.

Regardless, before putting in place any mentorship opportunity, make sure to highlight the value of mentoring for board development and secure buy-in from the full board. This will help anchor mentorship into the board culture, make it easier to recruit mentors and promote the overall sustainability of the mentoring opportunities in the long run.

Below are the steps to consider when setting up a mentorship initiative or program:

1 Set Goals

Mentorship can support several goals. Identifying which goals are most important to your board's needs will feed into how you design the mentoring initiative or program. Consider which of the following objectives would be relevant to your board.

Onboarding & Orientation:

- Provide new board members with a primary point of contact to answer questions and act as a sounding board;
- Make the new board member feel welcome, fostering a sense of belonging;
- Introduce the new board members to key connections (e.g., senior management, funders, strategic partners, etc.).

Learning:

- Support learning about the organization (e.g., strategic priorities, operations, finances, policies, etc.);
- Support continued governance learning, including about changes in the governance landscape and best practices.



Relationship Building & Growth:

- Get to know the new director, learning about how their skills, expertise, and experience can be used to support the work of the board;
- Assist in identifying leadership growth opportunities that could benefit both the board and mentee;
- Minimize risk as the mentee will have someone else on the board to bring sensitive issues to (in addition to board chair);
- Support succession planning.



2 | Select and Prepare Mentors

You may choose to make mentorship a requirement for all board members who have served more than two years on your board but it's important to consider:

- Board members who are more engaged (committee members, members who actively attend and contribute to meetings) may be a better choice to mentor a new board member than a less engaged member. However, keep in mind, more engaged board members might have less capacity to be a mentor. Take this into account when designing the program or initiative and selecting mentors;
- Experienced board members who are ending their first term are also a good choice, as they have knowledge of the board and organization but also still remember what it's like to be new;
- Depending on the goals of your mentorship opportunity, the skills that the selected mentors possess, and the profile of the mentees, it might be useful to provide some training for the mentors so that they can be prepared for the role and effective in achieving the goals.

3 | Select Mentees

All new directors should be mentored, regardless of experience or being part of an equity-deserving group. This will ensure that board members start their terms off on equal footing. Singling out some members may underscore or create power imbalances that could lead to future tensions.

4

Design the Roadmap for the Mentoring Relationship



SET-UP

How will the mentoring relationships be set up? Will it be 1:1 or group mentoring? Group mentoring involves mentoring sessions with a few mentees and 1-2 mentors and may be a good approach if the pool of mentors is small. It can foster bonding between new board members too. 1:1 mentoring is well suited to providing individualized support for mentees.



MATCHING

How will you match mentors to mentees? Consider the tenure, professional and personal background, skills and experience, and interests of both mentors and mentees. Is there an intake form or leadership development plan at the start of a board member's term where a new board member can outline areas of learning and goals for their board term? This will help in creating mentoring matches.



FREQUENCY

How often will mentors and mentees meet? Consider the frequency of your board meetings and align the mentoring schedule accordingly. Will mentors and mentees meet before a board meeting to prepare and/or after to debrief? Recommended minimal meeting frequency can be useful for informal mentoring initiatives to make sure that the relationship does not lose momentum.



DURATION

When will the mentoring relationship begin and end? Again, look at the board meeting schedule in the first year of a member's term – does it make sense to have the mentoring relationship last the year, or should it be extended or shortened? Be mindful of length, to respect your mentors' and mentees' time and make sure that the interest does not fizzle out.



FIRST MEETING

What topics should be covered in the first meeting?

When should it take place? Consider how this meeting can be an opportunity to create a personal connection and start building relationships but also a chance to answer questions related to onboarding and orientation. The first meeting should establish a mentoring meeting schedule, frequency of meetings, duration, roles, and goals.



CHECK-INS

Will there be regular check-ins to gauge the success of the mentoring relationships? Who will be responsible for checking in with the mentors and mentees? For more formal mentoring programs, you may wish to schedule a check-in with the board chair (or the mentoring lead) halfway through the relationship and at the end of the relationship.



CONFLICT

If something goes wrong, ensure both the mentor and mentee are aware of the board's procedures for conflict resolution and can seek assistance that is confidential and respectful to both parties. If it is better to end the match, ensure that there is an opportunity to meet & explain why the relationship is ending and that there is an opportunity for the board chair or the mentoring lead to hear feedback. Consider if it is a good idea to find a new mentor for mentees whose initial mentoring relationship did not work out.



Gather Feedback

Regardless of whether you put in place an informal mentoring initiative or a formal mentoring program, make sure to ask mentors and mentees to share their feedback and ideas about how to improve future mentoring opportunities.

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Minding Power Dynamics

The relationship between a mentor and a mentee, who are experienced board members & new board members respectively, does create a power imbalance. Ensure that individual mentors (and the mentorship program) are not reinforcing systemic biases and oppression. A mentoring program should not be used to assimilate new board members into the existing culture; the goal is inclusion, not conformity. While mentees are in a position to learn and be coached, they also have their own knowledge and perspectives to contribute.

Mentoring is a fantastic way to orient new board members, support meaningful participation, and forge strong working relationships and connections on your board. It creates opportunities for teaching and learning amongst board members regardless of role and life experience. Whether you implement an informal initiative or a formal program, mentorship can support the effective orientation of new board members, give them the skills and confidence to contribute to board activities and foster a positive and cohesive board culture.

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Connection is the energy that is created between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued – when they can give and receive without judgment.

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Brene Brown
PhD, LMSW

