

A Board's Continuing Education

By: [Bruce Lesley](#)

Bruce Lesley BoardSource Senior Governance Consultant

Question Are there practical and interesting ways to enliven continuing education for our board members?

Answer The short answer is yes! Continuing education, which is most often either mission based or governance related, is an important way to increase the board's "intellectual capital." Doing it effectively will greatly benefit your organization through better decisions in the future.

The simplest, most interesting way to educate your board members is to draw on the expertise and experiences around your board table and in your community. And it doesn't have to cost a thing!

Consider sending an article relevant to your mission to board members and then opening the next meeting with some form of the question, "What does this mean to our organization?" For example, in preparation for strategic planning discussions, the Drug Information Association sent Jim Collins's monograph, *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*, to all board members. A board member then led the group's discussion.

Why not open each of your next 12 board meetings with a discussion of one of BoardSource's 12 principles that power exceptional boards? This is exactly what the Rappahannock United Way has been doing.

Invite members of your community to address your board and field questions. U.S. Masters Swimming, which is moving from being managed by volunteers to being managed by a professional staff, recently invited a respected chief executive to speak about the roles and responsibilities of a chief executive.

Tour a mission-related site. The American Health Assistance Foundation holds one of its three board meetings at a research facility that it funds.

Think about following the lead of

- a health-related organization that opened a planning retreat with a presentation from a local professor about demographic changes in the community
- a symphony orchestra board that listened to a guest performer play three different quality violins to better understand why the board needs to

- raise funds for the best instruments
- a PBS station that asked a reporter to share her schedule and discuss the stories she is working on

Committee chairs or officers also should be charged with learning activities that relate to ongoing policy decisions. The treasurer, for example, is responsible for ensuring that all board members understand nonprofit finances sufficiently to make informed budget decisions. The secretary might consider presenting a 15-minute orientation on the legal responsibilities of board members before the discussion of a new conflict-of-interest policy. And the chair of a fundraising/development committee is well advised to first orient board members on how to engage a prospect or deliver the "elevator speech" before expecting them to be successful solicitors.

There are so many ways to enliven continuing education – pose this question to your own board members and see what great ideas they have.