



# Association of Small Foundations Quarterly Newsletter Summer 2006

## Welcome to the Board: Steps for Orienting Your New Trustees

By Elaine Gast

Imagine this: Your board has elected new trustees, and you're in charge of planning the orientation. The new members know next to nothing about serving on a foundation board, and it's up to you to train them for their role. You have a lot of information to share—and not a lot of time to prepare.

You know you need to introduce new trustees about the foundation, its mission and programs, and what it means to serve on a board. But where do you begin?

Take a deep breath. It's not as hard as you think. By following a few simple steps, you can give your trustees the tools they need, creating an orientation that is both effective *and* interesting. Here's how.

### Step One: Set Your Goals

First, take a look at what the orientation should accomplish. Most orientations aim to educate new trustees about the foundation—its mission, values, board, programs, finances and people. Orientation is an opportunity to train trustees on the general responsibilities of foundation boards, and the legal rules governing foundations. It's also a good time to clarify what the board expects from its trustees—and what trustees can expect from the board.

When thinking about your board's goals for orientation, ask yourselves:

- What do we want to accomplish?
- What do new trustees tell us they want to learn? (If you don't know, ask them!)
- How complex is our foundation's programs and operations?
- How can we present the information in a way that is clear and understandable?

If you define your goals *before* designing the orientation, they will help guide you along every step of the way.

### Step Two: Schedule Enough Time

It can be challenging to choose what to include in an orientation session and how long the event should last. Realistically, how much time can your board carve out for the event?

Typically, orientations last between two hours and a half day. If you decide to include a grantee site visit, the session will likely take a full day. If possible, it's best to hold your orientation as a separate event—outside of your regularly scheduled board meetings. Some boards conduct their orientation over the course of a few sessions, breaking up the content so as not to overwhelm the new member. According to one foundation trustee, “We hold orientation over a series of meetings with key players, using our board handbook as a way to get the important conversations started.”

Keep in mind—you will want the orientation to be an opportunity for exchange. No matter how much time you have, be sure to dedicate part of the session for questions and open dialogue. If time allows, it also helps to include breaks and at least one social meal to allow for some down time during the day.

### **Step Three: Design the Agenda**

Think of the orientation session as an opportunity to spell out the “nuts and bolts” of being a board member. The topics you choose depend on your orientation goals, your foundation’s particular mission, program and operations, and how much time you decide to spend.

There are many possibilities for what to include. For a detailed list of topics, read the ASF primer *Bringing on the Board: Simple Steps to Orientation* ([www.smallfoundations.org](http://www.smallfoundations.org)).

Broadly speaking, you will want emphasize trustees’ legal obligations, as well as any policies that affect their service—for example, conflict of interest, compensation, and directors’ and officers’ liability insurance. Explain to new trustees how the board invests the foundation’s assets, and how it manages its finances.

When talking about your own foundation’s history, grantmaking and board structure, be sure to address the “cultural norms.” For example, you might explain the flow of a typical board meeting—the meeting agenda, how voting works, and if the board encourages constructive debate. Your board can also take this opportunity to outline expectations in regards to attendance, terms and rotation policies—items that are often forgotten in the rush to confirm new members.

Finally, consider giving an introduction to foundations in general, and the broader field of philanthropy. You might also point out the challenges of the foundation business. For example, many trustees find it difficult to say no to so many worthy programs and people. Others feel uncomfortable being in a position of perceived authority over grantees and others in the community.

### **Step Four: Create Orientation Materials**

Every new trustee needs a set of materials to guide them along the way. Many boards create what's called a "board handbook"—a roadmap to the foundation's history, mission, grantmaking, operations, and more. Handbooks can be invaluable for teaching new board members about their foundation and their role. And it doesn't stop at orientation—trustees can continue to update and use the handbook throughout their term.

You can create the handbook by using materials that match your orientation agenda. Ask yourselves: *What is most important for new trustees to learn? What would be helpful for them to refer back to once the orientation is over?*

Here are some ideas on what to include:

- *Board roster*: Names of board members, with board positions, terms, and contact information; biographical information;
- *Calendar for the board's work*: Key meetings and tasks;
- *Foundation history and mission*: Brief history of the foundation; mission, vision, and values statements;
- *Foundation programs*: A page or two summary of your grantmaking program, including grantmaking guidelines, the board's process for deciding on grants, and grantmaking trends; most recent annual report; list of current grantees and grants;
- *Board responsibilities* ( usually in the form of job descriptions): committee lists and job descriptions for committees; self-assessment forms;
- *Bylaws and policies*: Articles of incorporation, or trust agreement; bylaws on board membership, term limits, rotation, attendance, etc.; board policies on conflict of interest, compensation, reimbursement, directors and officers liability insurance, and others;
- *Staff (if any)*: Names and job descriptions; personnel policies; organizational chart.
- *Finances*: Investment policy and reports; budget; audit statement; financial procedures; IRS Form 990 for past three years (or pertinent excerpts);
- *Minutes and issues*: Minutes of recent board meetings; description of current issues for discussion; sample meeting agenda;
- *FAQs*: Typical questions and their answers (*see ASF's Q&A section of its website for examples, at [www.smallfoundations.org](http://www.smallfoundations.org)*);
- *Glossary*: A list of philanthropic terms and jargon that newcomers likely will encounter (*for a sample, visit the Council on Foundations' website, at [www.cof.org](http://www.cof.org)*).

Some foundations view their board handbook as a work in progress—adding materials as the foundation evolves. The William Bingham Foundation, for example, created its first Trustee Handbook in 1987, focusing on the history and orientation for new trustees. Later, they expanded it to include a second volume called the Procedures Manual, which they distributed to all trustees. "The History and Orientation volume provides an introduction to the philanthropic world; foundation history; grant history; and information on the founder and other family members," said director Laura Gilbertson. "The

Procedures Manual contains the foundation's policies, procedures, forms and publications.”

Both volumes are organized in a three-ring binder, making it easy to add or replace pages over time. If you do decide to use a binder for your handbook, include a table of contents and section dividers. The more organized the handbook, the more you will help trustees find what they need, fast.

### **Who's In Charge?**

If they haven't done so already, your board should choose one person to coordinate the orientation. This person will act as the administrator of the event, contacting new members, scheduling the orientation session, and sending information (such as the agenda and the board handbook) to new trustees in advance. He or she will also work with the board chair and/or veteran trustees to design the agenda.

The board chair (along with one or two trustees, as needed) should lead the actual orientation event. Veteran trustees can speak to the history and vision of the foundation, such as the values of the original donors and how the foundation has evolved through the years. This can make for a lively discussion about the foundation's past and present. As one foundation trustee said, “It's very useful for teambuilding and motivation to have senior board members train younger, less experienced members.”

Remember—the more interesting you can make the orientation session, the more likely the trustee will be ready and enthusiastic to serve.

For more information on orientation, read the ASF primer *Bringing on the Board: Simple Steps for Orientation*, 2006. Visit [www.smallfoundations.org](http://www.smallfoundations.org).