



Field Guide: Orienting New Directors

By Michael Healy, CBLD Board Consultant

An effective orientation for new directors can help your board quickly integrate and benefit from the contributions of its newest members – shortening and decreasing the intensity of the naturally occurring “storming” phase that occurs when integrating new members into your team. While there will still be plenty of “on the job” learning during the first several board meetings, a good orientation process can make it more likely that the learning curve will be less steep. New directors can and should understand how they can be essential members of the team as soon as possible after they are elected or appointed to the board.

You can provide a solid orientation in a couple hours in one or more sessions. If there is a Cooperative Board Leadership (CBL) 101 training or other event coming up in the next 6 months, there is no need to replicate material that gets covered there. If new directors have to wait longer to attend the CBL 101, provide the Reader and review key aspects of Cooperative Governance now. And you may not need to replicate the education you provided during the recruitment, screening and nominations process; but at least make sure to include a review of that information in your post-election orientation. It’s also a good idea to check in with new directors after the first board meeting and again after six months to review any material or questions what have come up. Many boards also assign a veteran board member to be a mentor to incoming people. While leadership requires ongoing education for all directors, an investment of time before your first post-election board meeting will pay giant dividends when you have a functional team at that first meeting and throughout the year.

A good orientation will include five key elements:

1. How your board works

- Remember that every board has an operating system. How do you explain yours? The [Policy Governance Quick Guide](#) offers a straightforward explanation of Policy Governance®, if that’s the system your board uses.
- Review and explain your board’s policies, committee structure, and other key agreements.
- Review your annual calendar and multi-year plan.
- Make sure the new director knows what to do with the next meeting packet and what will happen at the next meeting.
 - Review last month’s meeting packet.
 - Connect what’s in the packet to board agreements about meetings, monitoring, etc.

- Include any cultural group norms to help the new director(s) feel part of the group. (For example, we often go out for a drink after board meetings. Or everyone tries to come to the meetings 10 minutes early so we can share personal greetings and still start on time.)
 - Build in some extra time in the first couple post-election board meetings to explain what is happening during various parts of the meeting.
 - Take time at the first board meeting after elections for each veteran board member to introduce themselves by sharing why they serve on the board and something they wish they had known in their first year. We were all rookies once.
2. What you expect of individual directors
- Focus on your Code of Conduct, including conflict of interest disclosure and confidentiality agreements. Discuss an individual's lack of authority to direct or judge staff. Clarify that an individual influences the co-op by influencing other directors.
 - Add details about your meeting schedule, etc., in order to explain how that Code plays out in real life.
 - Ongoing training and education
 - Attending board retreats, CBLD regional in-person events, CCMA
3. What your board is working on
- Review your board's past 6-12 months of work, including key issues you've addressed and important decisions you've made.
 - Review the last board retreat (or two) including key themes and outcomes
 - Outline your board's next 6-12 months of work, focusing special attention on upcoming decisions.
 - Help your new directors understand that they are stepping onto a moving train!
4. What matters about our co-op (Some of this information will provided by or in conjunction with your co-op's General Manager.)
- Your co-op's history
 - Your co-op's Ends or mission/goals. (Review your most recent Ends report if one exists.)
 - Business plans for the future (Review your most recent Planning and Budgeting report and Business/Operational Plan if these exist.)
 - Current and historical financial conditions (Review your most recent Financial Conditions monitoring report, especially if it includes long-term trend data, as well as current financial statements, if these exist.)
 - Highlights of the co-ops business activities, current conditions and priorities
5. How the work of our board and our co-op fit into a larger context
- The national and global cooperative movement
 - Local and regional food systems
 - National Co+Op Grocers (if your co-op is a member)
 - Regional co-op associations

Questions to consider:

1. Is there additional, ongoing support you can offer your new directors in order to help them succeed?
2. What resources and tools are available to support or enhance your orientation? (The CDS CC Library includes many resources that can be useful as part of an orientation packet.)
3. How does this orientation fit into your board's overall training and education plan?
4. Do you have an orientation for board candidates that complements your post-election training?

Related resources in the CDS CC Library:

1. Building a Positive Board Performance Culture, Parts 1 and 2
2. Perpetuating a Strong Board
3. CBL 101 Reader