

THE FIVE MOST COMMON STRATEGIC MISTAKES NONPROFIT BOARDS MAKE

Most nonprofit boards genuinely want to think strategically. Board members care deeply about the organization’s mission and want their service to make a difference.

Yet many boards struggle to stay focused on strategy. Even highly capable boards can fall into patterns that unintentionally pull their attention toward operations instead of long-term direction.

Recognizing these patterns is the first step toward building a stronger governing board.



THE FIVE MOST COMMON STRATEGIC MISTAKES

Mistake 1

Treating the Strategic Plan as an Event Instead of a Discipline

Many organizations invest considerable time and resources in developing a strategic plan. The board participates in a retreat, priorities are identified, and a document is produced.

Then the plan quietly disappears.

Board meetings return to operational updates and immediate issues, while the strategic plan sits on a shelf or in a shared folder.

Strategy is not a document—it is an ongoing set of choices. Strategic boards regularly revisit priorities, review progress, and adjust direction as conditions change.

The strategic plan should be a **working tool**, not an archive.

Mistake 2

Allowing Operational Reports to Dominate Meetings

Board packets often contain lengthy reports about programs, activities, and internal operations. During meetings, board members may spend most of the meeting discussing details within those reports. This creates the illusion of engagement while leaving little room for strategic discussion.

Strategic boards treat reports differently. Routine updates are reviewed in advance, often through a consent agenda, while meeting time focuses on **the implications of the information**.

The question becomes not “What happened?” but **“What does this mean for our direction?”**

Mistake 3

Confusing Governance with Management

Board members bring valuable professional expertise to the organizations they serve. However, that expertise can unintentionally pull discussions toward operational problem-solving.

Boards begin discussing staffing decisions, vendor selection, marketing tactics, or program logistics—issues that belong within the domain of management.

When this happens frequently, staff may feel second-guessed, and the board’s attention shifts away from strategic leadership.

Effective boards remain aware of operations but focus their time on **direction, priorities, and performance**.

Mistake 4

Focusing on Activity Instead of Impact

Nonprofit boards often receive reports describing what the organization has done:

- how many people were served
- how many events were held
- how many programs were delivered

These numbers are useful, but they do not necessarily answer the most important question:

Did the work make a difference?

Strategic boards focus on outcomes and impact. They want to know:

- What changed because of our work?
- Are we achieving the results we intended?
- How do we know?

Activity measures effort. Impact measures effectiveness.

Mistake 5

Leaving Big Questions for “Another Time”

Many board meetings include a brief agenda item labeled “strategic discussion.” Unfortunately, that item often appears near the end of the meeting.

After operational reports and routine business consume most of the agenda, the strategic discussion receives only a few minutes of attention—or is postponed entirely.

Strategic leadership requires intentional space.

Effective boards place strategic discussions **at the center of their meetings**, not at the end.

MOVING TOWARD STRATEGIC GOVERNANCE

Boards that want to strengthen their strategic role do not need to overhaul everything at once. Small structural changes can make a significant difference.

Start with three steps:

- redesign board agendas to prioritize strategy
- review progress toward strategic priorities at every meeting
- regularly ask forward-looking questions about the organization’s future

Over time, these practices shift the culture of governance from operational oversight to strategic leadership.

The Board’s Unique Role

Staff manage programs, deliver services, and handle daily operations.

Boards do something different—and equally important. They ensure that the organization is moving in the right direction.

When boards consistently focus on strategy, they help their organizations adapt, grow, and increase their impact.

That is the work only a governing board can do.