

# Nonprofit Board Leadership Initiative

Goals and Findings to Date

# What's included in this report:

This report includes both survey responses and a summary of discussion themes from conversations with two initial groups of stakeholders: a small group of board members and Executive Directors in April 2021, and one focused just on Executive Directors from July 2021. This report is broken into the following sections:

- **Page 3:** Overview of CSFF and the idea
- **Pages 4-8:** Survey themes and findings from the initial April 2021 stakeholders
- **Pages 9-14:** Discussion themes and takeaways from the April 2021 meeting
- **Pages 15-22:** Survey themes and findings from the Executive Directors only
- **Pages 24-27:** Discussion themes and takeaways from the July 2021 Executive Director conversation
- **Pages 28-31:** Newly released national data from BoardSource's Leading with Intent report
- **Page 32:** Next steps

# CSFF

## Goal

- To invest in the health and effectiveness of nonprofits by equipping organizations with the tools necessary to respond to varying community needs.

Effective leadership is the common denominator across all successful programs, services, organizations, and communities.

# Nonprofit Board Leadership Initiative (NBLI)

## The Idea

- *How do we build a long-term initiative that will push the boundaries to shift board effectiveness and board culture at a leadership level in order to improve nonprofits' impact in the region?*

To help inform the development of this initiative, CSFF invited members of the nonprofit community to take a survey and/or participate in a focus group to share their insights, experiences, and perspective. Following are the results of these efforts.

# Survey of Local Nonprofit Community

In March of 2021, CSFF sent out a survey to a small section of the nonprofit community to share their insights, experiences, and perspectives to inform the development of this initiative. The following provides a high-level summary of the responses from the 29 participants.

## Survey Objectives

- Gain greater understanding of the perceived current state of nonprofit board leadership in Routt County
- Gain insight into what characteristics nonprofit community members think make a strong, effective nonprofit board

## Greatest strengths of board members in the local community

- Relationships and Community Knowledge
- Skills and Expertise
- Passion
- Financial Resources (e.g., financial capital and fundraising support)

## Ways nonprofit boards should contribute to the effectiveness of organizations

- Expertise
- Strategy
- Fiduciary responsibility
- Fundraising
- Governance/Personnel
- Advocacy
- Compliance

## Strength of local nonprofit boards on a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being the strongest)

Mean and median = 7    Most common response = 8

---

### What would be most influential in raising that number

- Board Training and Continuing Education
- Operations (e.g., mentoring/training for EDs, more support for staff leadership)
- Board Engagement and Capacity
- Recruitment and Diversification of Board Members

# Greatest challenges facing local nonprofit boards that prevents them from reaching their potential

**Diversity of  
Board  
Membership**

**Time  
Availability &  
Engagement of  
Board  
Members**

**Understanding  
of Roles and  
Responsibility**

**Financial** (i.e.  
competing for  
funds, ability to  
hire strong  
leadership, etc)

# Top areas of training and education that would be helpful to increase board effectiveness in the community

## Most immediate impact (1-2 years out)

- Advanced Board Leadership Training (52%)
- Succession Planning (Board Leadership) (44%)
- Strategic Planning (37%)

## Longer term impact (3-5 years out)

- Strategic Planning (48%)
- Advanced Board Leadership Training (44%)
- Fund Development and Fundraising (44%)
- Board Member Recruitment (41%)
- Succession Planning (Board Leadership) (41%)

# Community Conversation with Local Nonprofit Members

In April of 2021, CSFF held a conversation with 22 of the survey participants. Additionally, three separate breakout groups contributed to the overall discussion. This overview is designed to present a high-level summary of the conversations that occurred across the various groups.

## Focus Group Objectives

- Share background and intent of the work with key community stakeholders
- Gain greater understanding of the perceived current state of nonprofit board leadership in Routt County
- Brainstorm opportunities to strengthen and elevate board leadership in Routt County

# Discussion Themes

## Passion

- There are many highly passionate people in the Yampa Valley who care deeply about the local nonprofit community. However, individuals often lack the background/skills to be expert board members and support the organizations in service of the mission.
- In many cases, board members perceived fundraising to be their primary responsibility. A stronger board leadership culture would encourage Board members to be engaged more holistically.

## Expertise

- The community has a plethora of individuals with unique expertise that can be of service to organizations. Translating that unique professional experience in order to help nonprofits in an effective way can be challenging.
- Currently, board members have a tendency to be more focused on operations than on the strategic questions facing the organization.

# Discussion Themes

## Collaboration

- Boards and board members can be an obstacle that prevent local nonprofits from collaborating. At times, they can lack the understanding of the broader landscape and context and/or don't often engage in the strategic conversations that could help cultivate more collaboration.
- There is an increased need for more collaboration as many nonprofits are struggling with similar challenges around human and financial capacity.
- Many nonprofits are willing and eager to share more information and collaborate more.

## Community / Ecosystem Lens

- There is a need to understand what is already being done to support board development in the region. How can we enhance existing offerings?
- Is there capacity in the community currently to offer third-party training and resources to all nonprofits?

# Discussion Themes

## Board Recruitment

- All three breakout groups discussed the challenge of recruiting experienced board members in addition to recruiting more diverse and younger board candidates.
- There is a lot of opportunity to recruit young and/or newly transplanted individuals into board roles, which can bring new energy and skills. However, there are often barriers that prevent nonprofits from connecting and engaging with these individuals:
  - For many younger professionals or individuals in hourly positions, they are unable to frequently take the time off to attend board meetings take place during the day.
  - For new community members, they often do not know the intricacies of the local nonprofit landscape and may not understand the nuanced, local issues that nonprofits often address through their work.

## Onboarding

- Many participants talked about the challenge of effectively onboarding new members and ensuring they understand their roles, responsibilities, and the commitment expectations / requirements.
- When new board members don't already have the skills and/or knowledge to be effective, it often takes significant resources to train them, usually at the expense of the individual nonprofits.

# Discussion Themes

## Training for Nonprofit Staff

- It was frequently mentioned that executive directors would benefit from training on how to manage, engage, and support a board successfully. The executive director is the constant presence as the board evolves, and their ability to manage and navigate the board is critical.
- There is also an opportunity for increased professional development for staff members of nonprofits to learn more about effective board management by either sitting in on board meetings of their own organization or serving on another board.

## Additional Training

- There was robust discussion about the need to support the next wave of board leaders to ensure they have the skills necessary to engage other members, run successful meetings, etc.
- Additional training around succession planning was also identified as a need.

# A Collective Effort

The community conversation shed light on the need for increased collaboration among the stakeholders within the Yampa Valley nonprofit ecosystem. The ideas discussed can be grouped into the following categories:

Training	Coaching & Mentoring	Conversation & Learning Networks	Tactical Sharing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Access to best practices</li> <li>● Governance training</li> <li>● Legalities &amp; liabilities of board responsibilities</li> <li>● Community focus mindset</li> <li>● Resources on social justice and DEI</li> <li>● Advanced board leadership</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● New board members being connected with with experienced board members</li> <li>● Seasoned board members having access to coaches</li> <li>● A mentorship program for new board presidents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Informal discussion groups</li> <li>● Bi-monthly meetups</li> <li>● Opportunities to learn about other nonprofit’s missions</li> <li>● Spotlighting what is working on various boards, etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Improved benefit packages for staff</li> <li>● Finance and CPA support</li> <li>● Human resources</li> <li>● Legal advice</li> </ul>

# Survey of Local Executive Directors

In July of 2021, CSFF sent out another survey to executive directors in the nonprofit community to share their insights, experiences, and perspectives to inform the development of this initiative. These responses were combined with the executive director responses from the survey conducted in March of 2021. The following provides a high-level summary of the responses from the combined 39 participants.

## Survey Objective

- Gain greater understanding from executive directors of the perceived current state of nonprofit board leadership in Routt County

# What are the greatest strengths of board members in the local community?

## Passion

- Passion for the mission of the organization
- Passion for the community
- Serve as an advocate and representative of the organization

## Skills and Expertise

- Diverse industry, professional background, and skill sets
- Knowledge and expertise (legal, mental health, finance, medical, etc.)

## Relationships and Community Knowledge

- Contacts and connections throughout the community
- Communication and willingness to collaborate
- An understanding and appreciation of the importance of our nonprofits to the fabric of the community

# What is the greatest challenge facing local nonprofit boards that prevents them from reaching their potential?

## Role Clarity

- Understanding of roles and responsibilities
- Understanding of governance principles
- Effective relationship between board/board chair and Executive Director
- Not thinking big or strategically enough

## Identification and Engagement of Diverse Board Members

- Diversity of background and skills
- Lack of people interested in serving on boards
- Time to commit to being an engaged board member

## Financial

- Lack of funds available
- Organizations competing for the same dollars
- Hiring strong leadership in a small market - ability to pay for cost of living

# Pertaining to board leadership, what is the greatest challenge you face as an Executive Director?

## Relationship with Board

- Understanding of roles and responsibilities
- Understanding of how to best collaborate
- Communication
- Finding time to develop relationships with board members

## Time and Engagement of Board Members

- Keeping board members engaged over time
- Time to commit to being an engaged board member
- Board members spread too thin

When thinking about the areas of training and education that would be helpful to increase board effectiveness in the community, which three of the following would have the most immediate impact (1-2 years out)?

<b>Succession planning (board leadership)</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>46%</b>
<b>Board member recruitment</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>41%</b>
<b>Advanced board leadership training</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>38%</b>
<b>Fund development &amp; fundraising</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>38%</b>
Board member roles & responsibilities (101 level)	10	26%
Succession planning (executive director)	10	26%
Diversity, equity, and inclusion	10	26%
Creating a successful ED/board chair relationship	9	23%
Strategic planning	8	21%
Advocacy	6	15%
Board governance	5	13%
Executive supervision and oversight	4	10%
Financial management & fiduciary responsibilities	2	5%

Thinking longer term, 3-5 years out, which three of the following would be most helpful in increasing board effectiveness in the community?

<b>Board member recruitment</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>37%</b>
<b>Fund development &amp; fundraising</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>37%</b>
<b>Succession planning (board leadership)</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>34%</b>
<b>Succession planning (executive director)</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>32%</b>
Strategic planning	10	26%
Diversity, equity, and inclusion	9	24%
Advanced board leadership training	8	21%
Executive supervision and oversight	5	13%
Financial management & fiduciary responsibilities	5	13%
Advocacy	5	13%
Board governance	3	8%
Creating a successful ED/board chair relationship	3	8%
Board member roles & responsibilities (101 level)	3	8%

## **Executive Director Experience vs. No Executive Director Experience:** There was alignment between groups on the greatest perceived strengths of local board members.

Passion for the  
mission of the  
organization and  
community

Knowledge and  
expertise

Contacts and  
connections  
throughout the  
community

## Executive Director Experience vs. No Executive Director Experience:

There were differences between groups in the greatest perceived challenges facing local nonprofit boards.

### ED Experience

Engaged board members with time to commit

Understanding of roles and responsibilities

Lack of people interested in serving on boards

### No ED Experience

Fundraising and organizations competing for the same dollars

Staffing/hiring the right talent

Diversity of background/skills of board members

# Community Conversation with Local Executive Directors

In August of 2021, CSFF held a conversation with 26 local executive directors. Additionally, five separate breakout groups contributed to the overall discussion. This overview is designed to present a high-level summary of the conversations that occurred across the various groups.

## Focus Group Objectives

- Share background and intent of the work with key community stakeholders
- Gain greater understanding from executive directors of the perceived current state of nonprofit board leadership in Routt County

# Discussion Themes

## Passion/Engagement

- Executive Directors find value in their board members and their ability to connect to a bigger circle of stakeholders in the community.
- Local board members have a lot of passion and energy. The challenge is knowing how to direct that passion and energy in the right direction.
- How can Executive Directors engage new board members? How can they continue to engage long-term board members?
- The pandemic has had an impact on board engagement - some board members have become too involved while others are not involved enough. How do we get board members engaged at an appropriate level?
- How can board members become better advocates of the organization within the community?
- It is important to take the time to align board members' passions/interests with the work they are doing on the board.
- How can we rely on the board chair to help with engagement?
- Executive Directors would like resources on how to honor and recognize board members for their work.

# Discussion Themes

## Roles and Responsibilities

- There is an opportunity to create more clarity around the roles of the Executive Director and board members, how they interact, and how to support and elevate both roles.
- There is concern about the capacity of Executive Directors to play a role in board effectiveness and board governance and a need to address their mental health and lack of capacity.
- Executive Directors would like more resources and support regarding setting expectations, onboarding, training, and managing board members.
- Executive Directors highlighted the importance of the critical relationship between themselves and the board chair, as well as the need for training for the board chair.

## Succession Planning

- In the local community, it is important to focus attention on succession planning for board members because there are many long-term board members who will be transitioning out of their roles.
- The process of hiring a new Executive Director is challenging. Boards might not always feel equipped to adequately address this possibility and thus can feel nervous about the topic. This might highlight the need for more time to be spent thinking about succession planning for the Executive Director.

# Discussion Themes

## Communication with the Board

- Board members need to be provided with the right level of information so they can fully understand what the organization is doing.
- While acknowledging the importance of transparency, Executive Directors discussed the challenge of providing enough detail to board members so they know what is going on and where problems are occurring, while not pulling them into the minutia and distracting them from their responsibilities as a board.
- There is a desire to understand best practices around how often organizations should have board meetings, and the content that should be included in Executive Director updates.

## Strategic Planning/Growth

- Organizational growth is good, but how do we bring the board along when growth is fast and complex?
- Many organizations are struggling because they do not have a structured strategic plan and/or training on strategic planning.
- How do Executive Directors and boards simultaneously manage a strategic plan and the more pressing needs from the pandemic?

# Discussion Themes

## Diversity

- It is beneficial to diversify the board in numerous ways.
- There is a lack of diversity in the community (or a perception of a lack of diversity). It was also noted that those with diverse experiences do not feel comfortable stepping into a board member role and/or think they have the skills to do so.
- How can we get to the point where both the Executive Director and board members bring diversity/equity to the forefront?

## Concerns about the Initiative

- How do we actually move the needle on changing board culture? Is it possible?
- How can we make the initiative applicable to the local community and each unique nonprofit?
- The difficult timing after the pandemic and when the future is uncertain. People are exhausted. It's hard to change board culture during a crisis.
- There is a desire to ensure that any/all trainings are digestible and contextual for the region/community. Where appropriate, how can local trainers be utilized?
- There is a real opportunity to bring people together in the community, and we want to make sure it's not only for discussion, but also for action and impact.

# BoardSource: Leading with Intent

**BoardSource Goal:** To strengthen and support nonprofit board leadership

**Leading with Intent:** Report on nonprofit board composition, practices, performance, and culture

- 10<sup>th</sup> study from BoardSource since 1994
- 820 survey responses
  - 689 executives and 131 board chairs
- Surveys completed between April and June of 2019



# Key Findings

Boards are disconnected from the communities and people they serve.

Boards that prioritize fundraising above all else when it comes to the board's role do so at the expense of organizational strategy, relevance, and impact.

Boards and executives should reflect on what is prioritized in terms of board expectations and how time is spent.

The board chair's leadership in ensuring that there are clear expectations of board service seems to matter most when it comes to the board's overall culture.

## Key Finding #1

Boards are disconnected from the communities and people they serve.

**1 in 2** Executives do not think they have the right board members to establish trust with the community they serve

**1 in 3** Board chairs place a high priority on knowledge of the community served

**1 in 4** Board chairs place a high priority on membership within the community served

## Key Finding #2

Boards that prioritize fundraising above all else when it comes to the board's role do so at the expense of organizational strategy, relevance, and impact.

Placing higher levels of importance on fundraising was associated with lower ratings of board performance in the following areas:

- Building a diverse and inclusive board with a commitment to equity
- Thinking strategically as a board
- Monitoring impact in the context of strategic goals or objectives
- Providing guidance to executives
- Understanding the context in which the organization is operating
- Setting the organization's strategic directions

## Key Finding #3

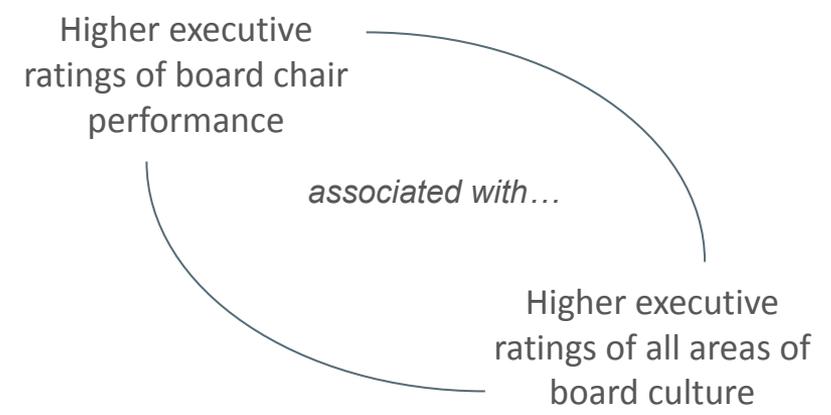
Boards and executives should reflect on what is prioritized in terms of board expectations and how time is spent.

Boards reported not enough time is spent on the following yet also indicated these were of low importance.

- 1 Building a diverse and inclusive board with a commitment to equity
- 2 Understanding the context in which the organization is working
- 3 Building relationships within the community that help support and inform the organization's work (separate from fundraising)

## Key Finding #4

The board chair's leadership in ensuring that there are clear expectations of board service seems to matter most when it comes to the board's overall culture.



# Next Steps- Building Momentum

## **Board Dialogues / Conversations (September to October)**

- 6 conversations of 8-10 attendees each
- Leverage format of a single conversation driven by powerful questions and pre-reading
- Goal: Build relationships and inspire elevated board leadership
- Opportunity: Collect additional data on the needs and desires of local board members

## **Community Training and Report Back (October / November)**

- Focused on tangible generative board leadership skill building, available to the entire community
- Opportunity to share what has been learned to date from conversations