

Board Assessment and Development



British Columbia
Library Trustees
Association

In British Columbia, there are 69 public library boards and at any time there may be well over 700 trustees across the province serving their communities through the governance and oversight of public libraries. Boards, like the public libraries they govern, function in a changing environment and are compelled to continuously evolve to strengthen their value and impact.

To do their work boards need to know where they are and where they are going. A board assessment and a development plan are key to board and organizational success and are the responsibility of the board.

This resource provides a look into the “why”, “how”, and “what” of board assessment and includes a sample of board assessment statements and questions, a board development plan template, and a resource section.

This resource was developed with advisement and input from trustees, library directors, and federation directors who shared resources and tools and their experiences, hopes, and ideas. This work was made possible with funding from the Public Libraries Branch, Province of British Columbia.

Why?

1. Effective Governance

Effective governance is developed and sustained by boards that assess their performance, results, and outcomes and have a board development plan.

While boards and the individual trustees on the board, should be engaged in ongoing assessment, an annual formal assessment is useful for ensuring that the whole board understands expectations and is committed to meeting those expectations. As well, a formal assessment provides the board with a record of growth and changing needs. That record helps to explain the board’s current

culture and practices and provides context for strengthening or shifting the board's development and succession planning for effective governance.

A study from the non-profit organization Charity Village discovered a correlation between boards that assess and develop their performance and organizational performance indicators that include :

- Perceived legitimacy and credibility with funders
- Competent board and staff leadership
- Board engagement in strategic planning
- Good financial stewardship
- Effective and efficient use of resources
- Efficient meeting management
- Low levels of internal conflict

Fiduciary Responsibility

Performing board duties with the highest level of integrity and in the best interest of the public library.

Duty of Care

Performing board duties with utmost care and thoroughness. Board work needs to be informed and accurate to the level that would be expected by any reasonable person.

2. Changing Needs

Public libraries evolve to meet the changing needs of their communities and to bring to their communities the advantages and opportunities of a changing world. It is to be expected that an effective public library board would also be evolving and seeking out opportunities to expand their understanding of the role of the public library board and the impact of their governance practices.

An assessment reveals the board's:

- Success or challenges with recruitment, diversity and inclusion, engagement, oversight, decision making and commitments such as reconciliation
- Readiness for changes such as a new library director, partners, funders, the legislative framework, board recruitment, board process, or emerging issues such as a global pandemic or a localized environmental or economic crisis
- Understanding of foundational values or emerging trends for public library governance such as equity, diversity, inclusion, intellectual freedom, privacy, and reconciliation, decolonization and Indigenization
- Skill set and strengths for how individual trustees might contribute to governance such as their ability, desire, and commitment to:
 - Lead and participate in strategic, fiduciary, and generative discussions
 - Ask open, insightful, and governance level questions
 - Contribute their personal, community, business, legal, human resource, or financial experiences and expertise to board oversight
 - Be inclusive and build camaraderie
 - Be civil, frank, and thoughtful during challenging discussions and decision making
- Need to change or strengthen the relationship with the library director
- Next opportunities and priorities for the board development plan

3. Accountability and Transparency

Public library boards are accountable to the communities they serve and to their funders.

No one single entity or individual provides direct oversight of the public library board's performance. As such, an objective assessment of the board's process, engagement, and overall performance demonstrates to the community and funders that the trustees are invested in their governance work, understand the gravity of their fiduciary responsibilities, and are committed to a high duty of care.

Most boards keep their assessment results confidential. **Boards should consider letting the community and funders know that the board has an assessment and development process and that board members are held accountable at board**

meetings for their responsibilities as trustees, including their ongoing learning and development. It is a good news story from the library that the board has a development plan to strengthen their governance practices and to stay current with community and public library discussions such as reconciliation, equity, inclusion, climate change, and intellectual freedom.

4. Change the Board's Story

If your board is teetering on the edge or deep in lack of engagement, meeting preparedness and participation, advocacy, civility, trust, inclusion, fiduciary responsibility, accountability, or transparency, then your board needs to start assessing or needs to start assessing differently. In other words, if you don't like the story of your board, change it.

Initiating the process or a discussion about why your board should assess where it is and plan where it wants to go will start to change the story of why people volunteer on the board and how the board does its work.

5. Tell the Board's Story

If your board is on track or already demonstrating engagement, meeting preparedness and participation, advocacy, civility, trust, inclusion, fiduciary responsibility, accountability, and transparency then you will want to better understand and tell yourselves how this is happening so that you can continue to strengthen and evolve this positive board culture.

Telling the board's story and recognizing the importance of why, how, and what the board assesses reinforces positive board culture and encourages the board to evolve its strengths and address its challenges.

The impact of a board's story on the public library, funders, and the community, where the board understands and demonstrates effective governance practices and behaviour, cannot be underestimated.

How?

Effective assessments are positive and encouraging. They are not a gap analysis or a pass/fail test. They strive to be an appreciative and well considered process that respects past efforts and work and informs the board's ongoing development. Importantly, board assessments evolve to reflect changes in governance growth, the inclusion of diverse trustee experiences and thinking, and to reflect the needs and hopes of the public library and the community.

1. Ongoing and Informal

Introducing ongoing and informal assessment as a regular part of board work may feel like the next step or it may feel awkward or challenging, but all feedback and improvement loops are strongest when they are given ongoing attention and care.

A board that already has a practice of encouraging personal reflection, non-judgmental observations, and open communication in their meetings will find doing this easier than a board that is working with challenging behaviour or disengagement. Either way ongoing and informal assessment is critical to effective board development.

An effective board is made up of engaged trustees who know their governance role and responsibilities, fulfil their fiduciary responsibility, act with a high duty of care, and are keen to contribute their unique skills and abilities in providing strategic direction and oversight. These trustees know how well the board is working and reflect on what more or different is needed for the success of the board and the library.

It is the role of the board chair to ensure that the board is encouraged to reflect on its performance and impact and that there is a mechanism for each trustee to provide ongoing feedback and to receive appreciation. Additionally, it is the responsibility of the board chair to quickly address disruptive, disrespectful, or counter-productive behaviour from trustees.

One way of incorporating ongoing and informal assessment into board work, that has been successfully used by boards that have a high level of openness and trust, is ending board meetings with appreciations and commitments. Appreciations and commitments may be something like the following:

- I appreciate the time the chair took in my orientation, it helped me feel prepared for my first meeting.
- I appreciate the work that went into the board package and I'm re-committing to reading the board package in advance and so that I can be part of informed discussions.
- I appreciate how thoughtful everyone was during that challenging discussion this evening. Even though we didn't all agree all the time, we were all focused on what is best for the public library.
- I'm committed to attending the upcoming advocacy workshop and then to meeting with the MLA.

If your board is considering this method of providing feedback it is important that the feedback is positively framed and that it is never a criticism (implicit or explicit) of another trustee or staff member.

2. Annual and Formal

All boards should have an annual formal board and trustee assessment. The board assessment should be anonymous and confidential and all responses should be about the board as a group and not about any one individual. Often during this annual process there is also an opportunity for trustees to provide an anonymous assessment of their own individual contributions and performance and to assess the role of the board chair.

The annual and formal board assessment should be:

- Guided by board policy (Whistler Public Library, [Policy Manual](#), 303 Board and Library Director Evaluation, 2020)
- Based on known board expectations (Nelson Public Library, [Policy Manual](#), Library Board Orientation and Development p.12 for example of board expectations)

- Reviewed during trustee orientation (BCLTA – ABDPLD Wise Practices: Trustee Orientation Checklist)
- Noted in the board calendar and scheduled for a time that benefits your board’s discussions and actions for board development, recruitment, and succession planning

The United Way of Canada recommends a six-step process in board assessment.

1. Decide on the purpose of the evaluation
2. Set up an evaluation structure
3. Prepare the evaluation design
4. Gather information
5. Analyze information
6. Action and implementation

When developing or reviewing the annual board assessment consider the following:

1. Does your board have clear expectations of trustees?
 - a. Are the expectations current and do they demonstrate a board commitment to equity, diversity, inclusion, and civility?
 - b. Are the expectations in your board information package and reviewed during trustee orientation?
 - c. Are the expectations discussed in board meetings and are trustees held accountable to and appreciated for meeting those expectations?
2. Does the board have development goals?
 - a. Did the board identify development goals for the year and are those reflected in the board assessment?
 - b. Does the board have long-term goals, such as greater board diversity and inclusion, and are those reflected in the board assessment?
3. What does your board typically do with the assessment results?
 - a. Are the results discussed by the whole board?
 - b. Do the results change anything in board behaviour or practices?
 - c. Are the results useful and used for tracking the board’s development over time?

4. When was the assessment tool last reviewed and updated?
 - a. What are possible assumptions and biases with your current assessment?
 - b. Are the assessment results credible?

5. What does the board need from the assessment process?
 - a. What questions and format of questions would reveal useful information about board performance?
 - b. What questions and format of questions would reveal useful information about board engagement?
 - c. What questions and format of questions would reveal useful information about trustee learning and development needs and trustee governance aspirations and interests?

What?

There are many books, articles, and online resources on board assessment and development (see the Resource section at the end of this document). Some organizations hire a consultant to lead them through the process and to provide analysis and a development plan. Others task a committee with the responsibility and find it helpful to borrow and adapt tools from similar types of boards. It is recommended that the board uses an online survey tool and ensures that responses are anonymous.

What your board decides on for assessment and development may be influenced by your unique needs, budget, capacity, and board culture.

Whatever process or tool your board decides on, you may want to consider the following lists of governance practices, board behaviour, and issues and topics that are commonly found in board assessments and board development plans.

Board Practices

- Trustee orientation and welcoming
- Board development
- Establishing and reviewing roles and responsibilities
 - Trustees
 - Board chair
 - Committee and working group chairs
- Aligning board work with the library's vision, mission, principles and strategic direction
- Establishing and reviewing a code of ethics, conflict of interest statement, and/or team charter
- Establishing and reviewing terms of reference for committees and working groups
 - Board and committee structure to meet the governance needs of the library
- Regular and reliable communications from the chair and the library director
- Regular and reliable meeting process
 - Clear, equitable, and inclusive process for introducing agenda items, motions, discussion, and decision making
- Effective and inclusive chairing
- Time for strategic and generative discussions
- Board documents
 - Timely and appropriate reports on strategic directions, results, and outcomes
 - Timely and accurate financial reports that demonstrate that resources are being used wisely for the sustainability of the library and for achieving the board's strategic directions and that financial controls are in place and adhered to
 - Useful agendas and use of consent agendas
 - Timely and accurate minutes
 - Yearly financial report and annual report is posted for the community
 - Grant reports and SOFIs are accurate and on time
- Establishing, reviewing, and updating board policies
- Establishing and providing oversight of the budget and strategic direction
- Fulfilling responsibilities as an employer

- Appointing and supporting a library director
 - Establish library director terms of employment and compensation
 - Collaborate with the library director on their performance review
 - Delegate operational management responsibilities to the library director
 - Provide oversight and support
- Familiarity with the legislative framework, HR policies, collective agreements and other employer documents
- Securing funding
- Planning and doing advocacy
- Building governance relationships with local elected officials and First Nation leaders
- Governing with accountability and transparency (demonstrated by easy public access to board information such as names of trustees, board email, agendas, minutes, policies, and key reports)

Board Behaviour

- Behaving with civility, respect, and integrity
- Having relevant, open, and informed discussions
- Encouraging diversity of thinking and contributions
- Listening and asking questions to understand
- Welcoming and inclusive
- Being prepared for meetings
- Respectful and meaningful participation
 - Includes meeting attendance and punctuality
- Understanding roles and responsibilities
 - Governance role clarity
- Fulfilling duty of care and fiduciary responsibility
- Operating with transparency and accountability

Board Issues and Topics

- Reconciliation, decolonization, and Indigenization
- Equity, diversity, and inclusion
- Privacy

- Intellectual freedom
- Human rights
- Governance and engagement
- Community needs, issues, and opportunities

Board Assessment Statements and Question

This section presents sample board assessment statement and questions. The statements have been compiled and tweaked from a variety of public library board and not-for-profit board assessments and grouped into the categories of board work, board behaviour, feedback on the role of the chair, and individual trustee evaluation. The intent of the sample statements is to provide a variety for your board to consider, adopt or tweak for your needs and as such some statements may appear to be redundant or repetitive.

As well, there is a small set of open-ended questions, which some boards may use as their entire survey while others might add them to a survey of Likert-scale statements for additional information.

There is no correct amount of assessment statements or questions for a survey, there just needs to be enough to measure what is important for your board's development. The contents of the assessment should to meet the "why" and "how" of your board's assessment needs.

Your board may decide to use Likert scale statements, open-ended questions, or a combination of the two. Wherever it makes sense, include opportunities for trustees to provide comments in the survey.

When using Likert scale statements there are two common practices. One practice is to include a "neutral" or "not sure" rating and the other is to not provide this option so that survey participants need to express a more definite either-or opinion.

Likert scale statements are introduced with a preamble such as:

Indicate the rating that reflects your experience with our shared board work over the past year. The rating scale for each statement is:

1. *Strongly disagree*
2. *Disagree*
3. *Not sure*
4. *Agree*
5. *Strongly agree*

Sample Statements: Board Work

Responsibility to the Library Director

1. The board understands and fulfills its role as the employer
2. The board has appointed a library director
3. The library director has received clear expectations and been delegated authority for successfully fulfilling their position
4. The library director is part of the governance team as a valued advisor and support to the board
5. The library director executes the board's strategic direction and has been delegated the responsibility for the management of the organization
6. The board trusts the judgement of the library director
7. The library director receives ongoing support and feedback as well as an annual review
8. The board ensures that the library director has support to participate in their association (ABCPLD) and in professional development
9. The library director is reasonably compensated
10. The board evaluates the director primarily on their accomplishments in achieving the goals in the strategic plan and on implementing policy

Responsibilities of the Board

1. The board understands and meets its fiduciary responsibility
2. The board is familiar with and abides by the Library Act and other relevant legislation

3. The board is familiar with library trends and issues
4. The board ensures that funding is in place and that they fulfill their fiduciary responsibility to the organization
5. The board is accountable and transparent to the community, to funders, and to strategic partners
6. The board champions the role of the library to the community, to funders, and to strategic partners
7. The board understands and is guided by the vision, mission, and goals of the library
8. The board participates in strategic planning and provides oversight of the execution of the strategic plan
9. The organization has a strategic plan that clearly sets out goals, priorities, and expectations
10. The board has ensured that the library has a one year operational plan
11. The board provides clear direction to the library director on achieving the organization's goals, primarily through the establishment of or referring to policies
12. The board establishes and ensures that governance policies are current
13. The board's trustee recruitment and succession plan is inclusive and equitable
14. The board has a trustee orientation plan
15. The board is committed to board development including an orientation process and ongoing governance learning
16. Board members are given support and opportunities to participate in governance learning and development

Board Meetings

1. Meetings make a difference to the work of the board and have a positive impact on the library
2. The board meeting process reflects effective governance practices and principles
3. The board has a decision-making process that is transparent, reliable, and makes sense
4. The board's meeting agenda reflects the strategic plan and the responsibilities of the board
5. Meeting agendas reflect the governance work of the board

6. The board receives accurate and timely meeting packages and board documents
7. The board receives accurate and timely financial reports
8. The board knows and requests the type and level of information it needs regarding the library's operations
9. Meetings are interesting
10. Meetings are a good use of volunteer time

Board Documents

1. Meeting agendas reflect the board's priorities and the organization's strategic direction and goals
2. The board receives appropriate and timely reports
3. The board ensures that funding reports and SOFIs are accurate and timely
4. The board has a policy manual that includes description of the board and board committee responsibilities. Every member has a copy or immediate access to an online copy of the manual.
5. The board has a document describing their decision-making process or rules of order that the board regularly reviews to ensure that they are transparent, fair, and serve the need of the board to be accountable to the community and funders
6. Agenda, minutes, and other board documents are shared and archived in such a way that board members have information when they need it

Sample Statements: Board Behaviour

1. The board behaves with civility and respect
2. The board expresses interest in library and community conversations such as intellectual freedom, inclusion, equitable access, reconciliation, decolonization, and Indigenization
3. The board encourages learning and development for individual trustees and for the whole board
4. The board focuses on policy and strategic oversight
5. The board understands the difference between governance and operations and stays within the boundaries of their governance role

6. Board members are aware of what is expected to be a fully participating and contributing member of the board
7. Board members arrive at meetings prepared and informed
8. Board members are punctual and mindful of time during the meeting
9. All board members participate in board discussions
10. All board members perform to a high duty of care in their board work and meeting participation
11. The board encourages different points of view and different ways of thinking
12. The board comes to decisions that make sense and are in the best interest of the library
13. The board is inclusive when recruiting new members
14. The board's orientation process is welcoming and inclusive
15. Board members attend special events at the library
16. Board members represent the library at special community events
17. Board meetings are interesting
18. There is healthy trust-based two-way communication between the board and the library director
19. The board trusts the judgement of the library director

Sample Statements: Feedback to the Chair

1. The chair sets a positive tone for the meeting
2. The chair sets a positive tone for the board's relationship with the library director
3. The chair is punctual
4. The chair understands the role and responsibilities of the chair
5. The chair adheres to a transparent and reasonable meeting process or rules of order
6. The chair is well prepared
7. The chair supports the board by adhering to the agenda
8. The chair responds to board needs or arising issues
9. The chair encourages full participation
10. The chair ensures that everyone is heard
11. The chair quickly addresses disruptive or disrespectful behaviour
12. The chair is skilled at managing difficult discussions

13. The chair is skilled at managing differing points of view
14. The chair brings the board together to work as a team
15. The chair effectively delegates work among the board
16. The chair has good listening skills
17. The chair summarizes and synthesizes board discussions
18. The chair builds consensus whenever possible
19. The board supports the chair

Sample Statements: Trustee Self-evaluation

1. I understand my governance role and responsibilities
2. I understand the library director's role and responsibilities
3. I understand the meaning of fiduciary responsibility and fulfill it
4. I understand the meaning of duty of care and meet it in all my trustee work
5. I have a good record of meeting attendance
6. I arrive at meetings on time
7. I read the board reports and arrive at meetings prepared to contribute
8. I am familiar with the library's by-laws and governance policies
9. I behave with civility and respect to the board and staff
10. I am a good listener at board meetings
11. I step up to board work such as joining working groups
12. I follow through on my board commitments
13. I champion the library to the community
14. I stay informed about what is going on in our community
15. I stay informed about issues relevant to the library and bring them to the attention of the board
16. I contribute to a welcoming and inclusive board culture and meeting environment
17. I express my ideas and informed opinions
18. I encourage others to express their ideas and informed opinions
19. When I have a different opinion from the majority I raise it
20. I support board decisions once they are made even if I don't agree with them
21. I maintain confidentiality on all board decisions
22. I am committed to the board's development
23. I have participated in board and trustee learning and development

Board Assessment Open-Ended Sample Questions

When using open-ended questions for a board assessment it is important to have a survey preamble that provides direction on what is expected and what is discouraged in responses.

Example Preamble:

When answering these questions please keep the following in mind:

- *To the extent that is possible, be anonymous*
 - *The intent of these questions is to strengthen the work of the board*
 - *Do not use this as an opportunity to criticize other board members or staff*
1. Over the past year what has excited you or most engaged you with board work? Explain why and provide concrete examples.
 2. Over the past year what has disappointed you or frustrated you with board work? Explain why and provide concrete examples.
 3. What excites or engages you about upcoming board work or what would excite or engage you?
 4. What is successful in our meetings? Explain why and provide concrete examples.
 5. What could be improved in our meetings? Describe how this could be improved and what would change in the board's impact or effectiveness.
 6. What is an area of growth for our board? (for example understanding financial reports, broader and more inclusive board recruitment, or decision making) Explain how growing in this area would improve the board's impact or effectiveness?
 7. Other comments

Board Development Plan Template

The template, including the preamble, is a synthesis of a variety of board development plans. This is just one of many ways to record your board's plan and progress. While we often think of planning for a full year, your board may want to consider a 4-month or 6-month plan that is reviewed and continuously added to so that board needs, emerging issues, and opportunities are considered and worked into the plan. A few examples have been added to the template to inspire your board to talk about what they would like to achieve and how they would like to do it.

BCLTA Resources for Board and Trustee Development

- BCLTA – ABCPLD Wise Practices: Trustee Orientation Checklist
- BC Public Library Governance: A quick guide for trustees
- BCLTA Discussion Starters
- BCLTA Governance Workshops
- BCLTA Trustee Meet-ups
- BCLTA Bulletin

Public Library Board 2021 Development Plan

Example Preamble:

The following board development plan was developed by the board and was informed by the board's assessment results and the board's discussion of the results. The plan reflects the board's development priorities, our capacity as volunteers, and accessible learning and development opportunities. The purpose of the plan is to:

- Strengthen the work of the board
- Engage trustees in their learning and development
- Express appreciation of the volunteer time and effort that trustees give to board work

The plan is:

- Flexible
- Aligned with the mission of the library and the work of the board
- Mindful of trustee time and diversity of experiences and needs

Month	Topic	Purpose	Action	Resource	Results / Feedback
Feb	Trustee Orientation	To welcome and prepare new trustees for their governance role	Library tour (library director) Coffee with chair and other trustees Follow-up phone call with chair Pre-board meeting welcome social Review meeting expectations and process with whole board at beginning of meeting Follow-up meeting / call with chair / mentor after first board meeting	Board Manual Board Documents BCLTA Trustee Orientation Checklist BCLTA Trustee Quick Guide	
March	Role Clarity		Attend BCLTA workshop		
April	Role of board as employer Reading budgets			Library Federation Meeting workshops	

May	Board advocacy workshop / discussion		Joining community partners and school board for afternoon of learning		
June	Reconciliation		Attending community forum Follow-up board discussion		
July	Strategic Planning & Oversight Retreat	To review current plan and reporting to date. To engage the board with the community and library's evolving needs and opportunities			
August		Stay in touch with the board, encourage discussion, keep trustees engaged – get trustees excited about September meeting and upcoming advocacy actions	Board chair sends out email with interesting resources – short blog post, short video regarding community or governance		
Sept					
Oct					
Nov	Board assessment				
Dec					

Resources

Board Effect. [Best Practices for Board Evaluation](#), 2016.

Board Source. "[Assessing Performance](#)", n.d.

Fish, Susan. "[The Best Board Member Orientation: How to set your new directors immediately up for success](#)", Charity Village, October 5, 2016.

Gibsons and District Public Library. [Board Manual](#), GDPL Board Evaluation, October 2020.

- A starting point for any board looking to develop an evaluation tool
- Includes sections for evaluating the work of the board, evaluating the board's relationship with the library director, feedback to the chair, and open-ended questions regarding board improvement.

Gill, Mel. [Board Assessment, Why Bother?](#) Charity Village. October 30, 2006.

- Slightly dated, but concise and relevant to public library boards.

Imagine Canada

- [Board Development](#)
- [Board Development Explained](#)
- While this is not directly applicable to BC public library boards, which operate according the BC Library Act, there are important points made regarding the need for a board development plan that is aligned with organizational priorities, supports individual trustee development and board success, and is purposeful in the use of organizational funds for board expenses.

Saskatchewan Rivers Public School Board. [2015-2016 Board Development Plan](#)

- Example of a one page board development plan

United for Libraries (American Library Association). [A Library Board's Practical Guide to Board Self-Evaluation](#), 2008.

- Use with caution; this resource is dated and has a US focus, but is highly adaptable to the common needs of BC public library boards.
- Useful for discussing the purpose of evaluations, board competencies, and areas for evaluation.

Vantage Point. [Board Development](#), n.d.

- Useful meeting assessment tool (p. 11)

Vantage Point. [Build your Board Development Committee](#), n.d.

- Example and explanation of the sequencing of development and the longer-term goals for development. As in, a plan may include an annual goal for board recruitment, but may need a 3-year goal for developing and reviewing governance policy.