Board Maturity Stages & Assessment

People often think that nonprofit boards move in a straight line from “new” or “start-up” to “fully mature” or “highly established.” However, a board’s maturity isn’t always linear and sometimes doesn’t progress solely through the passage of time.

Thus, rather than asking, “How old is our organization?” Board Building’s board maturity definitions encourage boards to ask, “How are we actually operating right now?” By looking at board roles, structure, and focus, boards can better understand their strengths, spot potential gaps, make more intentional choices, and provide stronger support.

Read more about **board maturity stages** below. To place a board among these stages, use the **assessment tool** later in this document.

Definitions

The five board stages Mollard Consulting uses during the Board Building process are **Start-Up, Early Growth, Stable, Mature,** and **Highly Established.**

Use descriptions below as a practical tool for reflection, to help you gain clarity about where your board is today and what might need to shift — or reverse — for it to continue to grow its maturity.

Start-Up

The Start-Up stage is a phase in which the board is highly hands-on to ensure basic survival and legitimacy.

Often this is because the organization is newly formed, but this is not always the case. For example, a longstanding organization might suddenly feel very much like a start-up if it launches a new initiative, faces a funding crisis, or brings in new leadership, while a younger organization might already operate with many of the characteristics of a more stable or mature board.

In the Start-Up stage, the board is founder-centric and highly operational, meaning they interact with the organization’s day-to-day work to ensure its basic survival. Board members often act simultaneously as volunteers, staff, and advisors rather than serving only in a governance capacity. Sometimes this is referred to as a working board, as opposed to a governing board.

The board’s primary responsibilities include legal formation, defining the organization’s mission, and securing initial fundraising. The organization relies heavily on personal networks and hands-on problem-solving to move work forward. The board is small and informal, with limited governance policies or standing committees. Board composition is driven more by availability, commitment, and passion than by a deliberate balance of skills or expertise. During this stage, the board focuses on establishing the organization’s mission, vision, and core programs, securing seed funding and basic financial controls, achieving legal compliance through incorporation and tax-exempt status, and ensuring the organization’s survival and legitimacy.

Early Growth

In the Early Growth stage, the board is less hands-on with implementation and focuses more on governance and oversight while emphasizing the organization's expansion.

The board begins transitioning from acting as doers to serving as overseers, although members remain operationally involved in many aspects of the organization. The board takes on increasing responsibility for fundraising, particularly in cultivating donors and expanding the funding base. The board also begins to supervise the executive director more formally, introducing clearer expectations and accountability. The board structure expands in size, and initial standing committees, such as finance and development, are established. The board adopts basic governance policies and refines the organization's bylaws. During this stage, the board focuses on expanding programs and ensuring consistent service delivery, diversifying revenue beyond founder-led fundraising, strengthening financial management and internal controls, and clarifying roles and boundaries between the board and staff.

Stable

The Stable stage is one where the board is firmly governance-focused and the organization operates with greater predictability and structure.

In the Stable stage, the board is primarily governance-focused rather than operational. Board members carry clear fiduciary, strategic, and oversight responsibilities, while day-to-day management rests with staff. The executive director is firmly established as the organization's chief executive. The board is intentionally composed with a balance of skills and experience, and recruitment is strategic rather than reactive. The board operates through a well-defined committee structure and maintains regular board evaluation and orientation processes. During this stage, the board concentrates on strategic planning and performance monitoring, ensuring long-term financial sustainability, managing risk and compliance, and supporting leadership development and staff capacity.

Mature

The Mature stage is a phase in which the board acts as a strategic steward focused on impact, sustainability, and adaptation.

In the Mature stage, the board serves as a steward of strategy and an organizational ambassador. Board members focus on policy, oversight, and high-level strategic decision-making rather than operational details. The board maintains a strong and collaborative partnership with executive leadership. The organization operates with sophisticated governance systems and policies that guide board and staff work. The board engages in succession planning for both board and executive leadership to ensure continuity. Committees are aligned with strategic priorities rather than routine operations. The board's focus includes advancing organizational impact and outcomes; strengthening brand, reputation, and stakeholder relationships; planning for capital needs; building reserves and endowments; and adapting to changes in the external environment, funding landscape, and nonprofit sector.

Highly Established

The Highly Established stage is when the board's focus is to safeguard the mission across generations while shaping broader sector impact.

In the Highly Established stage, the board acts as the guardian of the organization's mission, legacy, and long-term relevance. The board concentrates on governance at a systems and enterprise level rather than on individual programs or operations. Board members play a role in influencing the broader nonprofit or policy environment beyond the organization itself. The board is large, highly skilled, and diverse, bringing a wide range of perspectives and expertise. Governance practices are formalized, including term limits and ongoing board education. The organization also utilizes advisory councils or auxiliary boards to extend its reach and capacity. In this stage, the board focuses on innovation, transformation, and sector leadership; managing enterprise-level risks and opportunities; ensuring mission sustainability across generations; building strategic alliances and pursuing mergers when appropriate; and advancing field-level impact.

Board Maturity Assessment

Below is a **scored assessment** you can use with your board. It's designed so results generally point toward one of the five stages, while still allowing for nuance. You can administer this as a group discussion, self-assessment, facilitated exercise, or anonymous survey.

For each question, select the answer that best describes your board **right now** and record the points. At the end, total your score and use the key to interpret your board's stage.

A: Board Role (0–20 points)

1. **How would you describe the board's primary role?**
   A. Mostly doing the work of the organization (0 points)
   B. A mix of doing and overseeing (2 points)
   C. Mostly overseeing with some hands-on support (4 points)
   D. Primarily governance, strategy, and oversight (5 points)

2. **How much board meeting time is spent on operations vs. strategy?**
   A. Mostly operations (0 points)
   B. More operations than strategy (2 points)
   C. More strategy than operations (4 points)
   D. Almost entirely strategy and governance (5 points)

3. **How would you describe the board–chief executive relationship?**
   A. Founder/board largely leads operations (0 points)
   B. Informal supervision of chief executive (2 points)
   C. Clear but still evolving supervision (4 points)
   D. Strong, formal partnership with clear roles (5 points)

4. **Does the board act as external ambassadors?**
   A. Rarely (0 points)
   B. Sometimes, inconsistently (2 points)
   C. Regularly for fundraising or relationships (4 points)
   D. Consistently for strategy, policy, and reputation (5 points)

B: Leadership & Founder Dynamics (0–15 points)

5. **Is the founder still active?**
   A. Yes, central to decisions and operations (0 points)
   B. Yes, but sharing leadership (2 points)
   C. Yes, but largely in an advisory role (4 points)
   D. No longer involved (5 points)

6. **How formal is supervision of the chief executive?**
   A. Informal or unclear (0 points)
   B. Some structure, inconsistent (2 points)

C. Regular performance reviews (4 points)
D. Clear, documented process with metrics (5 points)

7. **Do you have succession plans?**
A. No (0 points)
B. Informal discussion only (2 points)
C. Written plan for either board or chief executive (4 points)
D. Written plans for both board and chief executive (5 points)

C: Board Structure (0–20 points)

8. **Board size and composition are primarily driven by:**
A. Who is available and committed (0 points)
B. Relationships with some attention to skills (2 points)
C. Mix of skills and relationships (4 points)
D. Clear skills matrix and intentional recruitment (5 points)

9. **Committee structure:**
A. No formal committees (0 points)
B. One or two informal committees (2 points)
C. Standing committees (4 points)
D. Standing and ad hoc committees aligned to strategy (5 points)

10. **Board onboarding and evaluation:**
A. None (0 points)
B. Irregular or informal (2 points)
C. Regular onboarding but limited evaluation (4 points)
D. Formal onboarding and regular board self-evaluation (5 points)

11. **Term limits:**
A. None (0 points)
B. Discussed but not adopted (2 points)
C. Adopted but inconsistently followed (4 points)
D. Adopted and consistently practiced (5 points)

D: Governance & Policies (0–15 points)

12. **Bylaws status:**
A. Outdated or rarely referenced (0 points)
B. Mostly current but not recently reviewed (2 points)
C. Recently updated (4 points)
D. Regularly reviewed and aligned with practice (5 points)

13. **Core governance policies (Conflict of Interest, whistleblower, insurance, etc. points):**
A. Few or none (0 points)
B. Some but unevenly used (2 points)
C. Mostly complete and used (4 points)
D. Comprehensive and actively enforced (5 points)

14. **Clarity of board vs. staff roles:**
A. Frequently blurred (0 points)
B. Improving but inconsistent (2 points)

C. Mostly clear (4 points)
D. Very clear and documented (5 points)

E: Strategy & Planning (0–15 points)

15. **Do you have a current strategic plan?**
    A. No (0 points)
    B. Yes, but not actively used (2 points)
    C. Yes, referenced periodically (4 points)
    D. Yes, actively guiding board agendas and decisions (5 points)

16. **How does the board engage with strategy?**
    A. Rarely discusses it (0 points)
    B. Annual retreat only (2 points)
    C. Regular check-ins (4 points)
    D. Ongoing strategic oversight and scenario planning (5 points)

17. **Risk management:**
    A. Reactive only (0 points)
    B. Occasionally discussed (2 points)
    C. Part of regular oversight (4 points)
    D. Systematic enterprise risk approach (5 points)

F: Finance & Sustainability (0–15 points)

18. **Revenue mix:**
    A. Mostly founder-driven or single source (0 points)
    B. Some diversification (2 points)
    C. Multiple reliable streams (4 points)
    D. Highly diversified, including reserves/endowment (5 points)

19. **Board role in fundraising:**
    A. Minimal (0 points)
    B. Some participation (2 points)
    C. Actively engaged (4 points)
    D. Strategically leads relationships and campaigns (5 points)

20. **Financial controls:**
    A. Basic or inconsistent (0 points)
    B. Adequate but evolving (2 points)
    C. Strong internal controls (4 points)
    D. Robust controls and long-term financial planning (5 points)

G: Impact & External Role (0–10 points)

21. **How does the board think about impact?**
    A. Mostly outputs/activities (0 points)
    B. Emerging focus on outcomes (2 points)
    C. Regular outcome monitoring (4 points)
    D. Impact drives strategy and resource allocation (5 points)

22. **Public/sector role:**
A. Little to no external engagement (0 points)
B. Some partnerships (2 points)
C. Regular stakeholder engagement (4 points)
D. Influences public policy or field-level practice (5 points)

Scoring Key

Total possible score: 100 points

0–25 → Start-Up
Board is highly operational, founder-centric, informal governance, and survival-focused.

26–45 → Early Growth
Board is moving toward oversight, expanding structure, and growing fundraising capacity.

46–65 → Stable
Board is primarily governance-focused, with clear roles, consistent strategy, and consistent controls.

66–85 → Mature
Board is focused on strategic stewardship, strong systems, impact, and sustainability.

86–100 → Highly Established
Board is focused on enterprise-level governance, sector leadership, and long-term legacy.

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