

CREATE A SHARED UNDERSTANDING ABOUT GOVERNANCE RESPONSIBILITIES

There are eight critical governance functions in nonprofit organizations, with a set of corresponding responsibilities. While the governance functions and responsibilities remain fairly constant between organizations, the way they are carried out (e.g. tasks, activities, structures and processes) vary widely depending on the organization's unique circumstances.

This tool presents the key functions and responsibilities of governance, providing organizations with a concise and comprehensive overview. It helps ensure there's a consistent and shared understanding among all those who participate in governance, including the board, CEO/ED, management, volunteers from the community, and other key stakeholders.



At a glance: What this tool makes possible

Generates a clear and shared understanding of the functions and responsibilities of governance



You may find it helpful to start with this [Innovation readiness pulse-check](#).

Create a shared understanding about governance responsibilities



HOW IT WORKS

Start by reviewing a description of the governance functions and their corresponding responsibilities, as well as a concise and clear description of the board's essential responsibilities based on law and legislation. If necessary, also refine the descriptions of responsibilities based on their unique circumstances. Then, create a formal document that can be used for governance orientations and as a touchstone when designing and refreshing how they do governance, such as creating accountability mechanisms, determining how strategic choices are made, and establishing governance policies.

The process can be done by the CEO/ED and a board member or a small working group. The amount of time varies depending on how much work has already been done to describe governance responsibilities. If you're doing this as a check-in, then it can be completed within a few hours. If not, then it may take more time to formalize the understanding of responsibilities.



DEEPER DIVE: WHAT THIS TOOL MAKES POSSIBLE

- **Generates a clear and shared understanding of the functions and responsibilities of governance.** It's challenging for many organizations to access clear information about the responsibilities of governance. It can be dispersed throughout governance policies and in the bylaws, making it hard to see the whole picture. In some organizations, there are blurred lines and confusion because they are described as board roles and responsibilities, even though participation in governance is more expansive. In some cases, people bring different interpretations and assumptions about the responsibilities of governance, based on factors such as age, life experiences, and access to governance education.

Governance work can also get sidelined by other activities. In many organizations, the board must perform important operational functions because it's volunteer-lead or there's a small staff. It makes it tough to stay focused on fulfilling governance.

Create a shared understanding about governance responsibilities

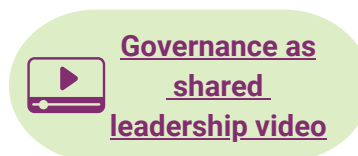
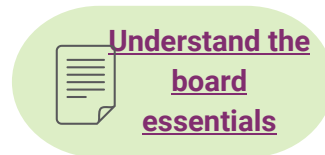
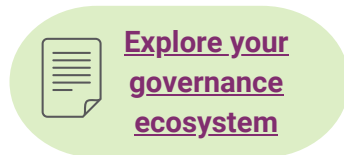
Having an easy-to-reference and comprehensive description of all the governance functions and responsibilities will keep governance work prominent, be helpful in orientations, and serve as an important checklist when creating or refreshing the governance processes, practices, and structures.



DETAILED PROCESS STEPS:

1 Build or refresh your organization's description of governance responsibilities.

- Review the following resources. They are important grounding for the conversations.



- **If necessary, make refinements to the description of governance functions and responsibilities based on your unique circumstances.**

The description of governance functions and responsibilities is based on extensive research and review by many experts, and the fundamentals won't change. But each organization's governance is different, so you may want to customize it to align with your unique circumstances.

For example, there might be specific language your organization uses to

Create a shared understanding about governance responsibilities

describe governance responsibilities (e.g., *in risk management or strategic planning*), regulations or legislation unique to your field of activity that set out responsibilities that aren't captured or need to be edited, or better examples of the various responsibilities.

- It might be helpful to brainstorm how your organization fulfills these responsibilities to trigger any other edits or shifts you'd like to make.
- Access a [note-taking worksheet](#) to help your descriptions and notes. You could also use a different method such as a collaborative whiteboard software or flipchart paper.

2 Create a formal, living document.

- Formalize the functions and responsibilities of governance in a document and ensure it's shared (e.g., *board orientation package*), so that new board members and management share a consistent understanding. It can also become an important foundational document when building or refreshing how governance is done (e.g. *revise or create new processes, structures*).

3 Review regularly.

- Put mechanisms in place to review the document to ensure it remains relevant, as law, legislation and regulation, and/or organizational circumstances change (e.g., *have a simple check-in every year*).

This tool is part of the Reimagining Governance Lab, a virtual hub for governance innovation full of resources, tools, and stories. [Visit the Lab.](#)

We operate under a [Creative Commons Licence- Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0](#), so you can copy and redistribute the material. We ask that you give appropriate credit: Created by the Ontario Nonprofit Network in collaboration with Ignite NPS. We require that materials and documents be shared in their entirety, and have branding intact.