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# **The National Board Basics Curriculum Project: A Leadership Capacity Building Tool for Boards**

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**Abstract:** We explain in this article the need for board training in rural America irrespective of industry or government sector. We discuss how an assessment of training needs has led to the launch of a new project called the National Board Basics Curriculum (NBBC) project. In this project, we have identified four key core competencies that every board needs collectively to be a high-performance system. We provide preliminary results of our findings as a tool Extension educators can use with boards in rural communities. Extension educators can use these existing resources and many more developed through the NBBC project.

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## **Introduction**

Leadership and organizational training for both private and public boards is vital for effective decision making and use of scarce resources in communities. In many rural communities, boards do not have adequate access to training or sufficient resources to purchase training from government, industry associations, or consulting firms. Lack of access to effective, affordable training can lead board members to focus on the short-term, day-to-day operations at the expense of longer-term and more strategic board development. The result can be high turnover, conflict that is poorly addressed or unresolved, legal issues mishandled, and compromised financial performance. Further, recruitment of new board members becomes increasingly difficult as negative opinion of board performance travels quickly, especially in rural communities (Barnes & Haynes, 2006).

While there are some general resources for both private and public board training and management, there is a clear need to develop comprehensive and context-specific material for the many types of boards operating in various industries and organizations (academia to corporate). For example, educational materials and training to citizens, elected officials, and public employees on board authority, responsibility, and jurisdiction exist but to a limited degree (Bianchi, 1997; Fisher, 2007; Kirlin, 2003; Torp, 1994). Across the United States, there are tens of thousands

of distinct local government entities that include municipalities, counties, school districts, and special districts. Each government entity can contain multiple boards with countless participating citizens meeting in a variety of public forums. Poorly managed public boards serve to increase apathy and mistrust in government, thereby decreasing effective participation.

Effective boards, whether private or public, offer an opportunity for more productive and fulfilling participation, enhancement of trust, and creation of a more robust and deliberative board process, which in turn can produce greater employee job satisfaction, increases in profits, and accomplishment of organizational objectives. Hence, all boards should view the basics of board service as part of an overall leadership development program. Key questions related to need include the following: Which training materials currently exist on effective board leadership development? How can these resources be best collected and assimilated to design and deliver an effective board leadership program? To address these needs, we announce a multiple land grant collaborative initiative to answers these questions: the National Board Basics Curriculum (NBBC) project.

## Project Objectives

The main goal of the NBBC project is to organize a set of existing public and private training resources that provide the basics of governance principles, develop an inventory of needs, and compile a new national board curriculum that fills in the gap between available resources and board training needs.

Key questions include the following.

- Where do board leaders in rural communities turn to access training curricula? Are they aware of existing training resources available through the National Institute for Food and Agriculture (formerly the U.S. Cooperative State Research, Extension Education Service)?
- Which areas of training are most important for creating a culture of trust among board members and high performance overall? What are the various costs of such training programs?
- How will the NBBC project distribute its study results to public officials and citizens to advance the adoption of basic board governance principles?

The NBBC project has four objectives assessing the operation of boards. Objectives include the following.

1. Conduct a needs assessment survey of key rural organizations such as agricultural cooperatives/rural health care organizations (e.g., hospitals, community health clinics) to understand core, government and industry-specific board management needs.
2. Compile existing training resources and review management literature to identify a set of board management best practices that every board member should know to improve his or her ability to contribute to effective board governance. We will include online resources from multiple websites, university-based training, those programs offered by state and federal governments, industry-specific consulting firms and associations as well as our own programs.
3. Analyze board training needs identified in #1 to understand any gaps between board training needs and availability of resources. We will then develop a set of NBBC core competencies that every board member

needs to be an effective board member.

4. Organize and present findings to Extension educators through online publications, eXtension, Facebook, Twitter, blogs, webinars, on-site presentations, and trainings.

## Core Competencies and the National Taxonomy of Training Resources

Our preliminary analysis has shed light on *some* of the existing public and private resources available to boards. With this national inventory, we determined there are four principal core competencies. These include:

1. Foundations of board governance (including relevant legal frameworks, good governance and ethical principles);
2. Effective meeting and facilitation techniques with a focus on procedural methods (such as Roberts Rules of Order);
3. Conflict management; and
4. Leadership, team-building, and strategic planning skills.

Nationally, we found these four competencies to be the most common forms of board training made available by public and private organizations, including the Cooperative Extension Service. The table below is self-explanatory. We conducted a national inventory of existing Extension board training curricula and offer this sample of resources as a tool that can assist community development Extension professionals as they work with boards in rural communities.

**Table 1.**

Sample Taxonomy of Board Training Resources Available Through the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, 2010

State	Resource Title	Description	Website (URL)
Alaska	The Chair Recognizes	This booklet is designed to ease the burden of interpreting and reinterpreting the intricacies of parliamentary procedure.	<a href="http://www.uaf.edu/ces/pubs/catalog/detail/index.xml?id=67">http://www.uaf.edu/ces/pubs/catalog/detail/index.xml?id=67</a>
Iowa	Improving Zoning Board	The purpose of this publication	<a href="https://www.extension.iastate.edu/store/ItemDetail.aspx?ProductID=5333&amp;">https://www.extension.iastate.edu/store/ItemDetail.aspx?ProductID=5333&amp;</a>

	Decisions	is to examine the role and function of the zoning board and to suggest strategies for improvement.	SeriesCode=&CategoryID=&Keyword=Zoning
<b>Louisiana</b>	Healthy Boards: An Introduction to Governance	This interactive four hour program provides boards of any type with training in conflict management, team-building and presents good governance principles.	<a href="http://www.lsuagcenter.com/en/community/community_dev/DeltaRuralDevCenter/Rural_Gov_Leadership/">http://www.lsuagcenter.com/en/community/community_dev/DeltaRuralDevCenter/Rural_Gov_Leadership/</a>
<b>Michigan</b>	Look At The Clock! Ways to Streamline Meetings	Numerous time-use strategies are available to the person in charge if they are willing to explore and incorporate appropriate measures.	<a href="http://www.msue.msu.edu/workspaces/one.cfm?workspace_id=213590&amp;object_id=369314&amp;tab=object_view">http://www.msue.msu.edu/workspaces/one.cfm?workspace_id=213590&amp;object_id=369314&amp;tab=object_view</a>
<b>Michigan</b>	Welcome on Board (etc.)	Various resources including "How Not to Begin your Career as a Member of the District Board"	<a href="http://www.macd.org/assets/downloads/Director_Hndbk/TOC.pdf">http://www.macd.org/assets/downloads/Director_Hndbk/TOC.pdf</a>
<b>Minnesota</b>	Committees that Work: Common Traps and Creative Solutions (etc.)	This guide is for individuals and teams who want to both improve the performance and productivity of their committees.	<a href="http://shop.extension.umn.edu/PublicationDetail.aspx?ID=1982">http://shop.extension.umn.edu/PublicationDetail.aspx?ID=1982</a>
<b>Mississippi</b>			<a href="http://msucares.com/water/waterboard/waterindex.html">http://msucares.com/water/waterboard/waterindex.html</a>

	Water Board Management Training Program	The Mississippi State University Extension Service Community Resource Development contracted with the Mississippi Department of Health to provide coordination and support to the Public Water System Board Management Training Program.	
<b>Montana</b>	Serving on County Boards, Districts, Commissions and Committees in Montana	A 45-page resource for people supervising, serving on or interested in public boards across the state. Among the topics covered in the handbook are Montana's open meetings law, code of ethics, board liability, information on wrongful discharge, discrimination, and use of Robert's Rules of Order and motions.	<a href="http://www.msuextension.org/store/Products/Serving-on-County-Boards--Districts--Commissions-and-Committees-in-Montana__4500.aspx">http://www.msuextension.org/store/Products/Serving-on-County-Boards--Districts--Commissions-and-Committees-in-Montana__4500.aspx</a>
<b>Ohio</b>	Tips for New Board Members	Various resources including 21st Century Boardmanship and Nine	<a href="http://www.cbdleague.com/trustees/Boardmanship.pdf">http://www.cbdleague.com/trustees/Boardmanship.pdf</a>

		Principles of Boardmanship.	
<b>Wisconsin</b>	Parliamentary Procedure for Local Government	A PowerPoint overview of parliamentary procedure.	<a href="http://polk.uwex.edu/cnred/documents/ParliamentaryProcedurepresentation.ppt">http://polk.uwex.edu/cnred/documents/ParliamentaryProcedurepresentation.ppt</a>
<b>Wisconsin</b>	Wisconsin Open Meetings Law	Overview of board meeting law.	<a href="http://lgc.uwex.edu/program/pdf/fact1-03.pdf">http://lgc.uwex.edu/program/pdf/fact1-03.pdf</a>
<b>Wyoming</b>	Wyoming Board Member Resources	Various resources on open meeting law, parliamentary procedure, board member training, and strategic planning.	<a href="http://uwadmnweb.uwyo.edu/CDE/Board_Training.asp">http://uwadmnweb.uwyo.edu/CDE/Board_Training.asp</a>

## Conclusion

We realize Extension educators work closely with public officials and industry to strengthen leadership capacity in rural communities. We offer the resources in Table One as an initial tool to support this important aspect of rural development work in the U.S. We intend to develop curricular materials that will include detailed handbooks, case study exercises, relevant handouts and worksheets for trainings, and a series of Web-based resources, including podcasts to further support board governance and leadership capacity building in rural communities. We plan to use the new eXtension Local Government Extension Training group to support distribution of the NBBC project findings as well as interaction with affiliated initiatives including the new Managing in Tough Times Network (MITTNET).

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