

A board handbook — sometimes called a board manual or board binder — is the single reference document that gives board members everything they need to understand the organization, their role, and how the board functions. It is not a strategic plan, a personnel manual, or a policy library. It is a curated collection of the most essential governance information, organized for easy access.

Most organizations have something that functions as a board handbook. Many are outdated, incomplete, or so dense that no one reads them. This guide explains what a strong board handbook contains, what each section should accomplish, and how to maintain the document so it stays useful over time.

This guide vs. a handbook template:

This is a planning and content guide, not a fill-in-the-blank template. A board handbook is most useful when it is tailored to your organization — its culture, its stage of development, its specific governance structures, and the actual documents it has in place. Use this guide to decide what to include and why, then build from your own materials.

What a Good Handbook Does

A well-built board handbook serves four purposes:

- It orients new board members quickly, so they can participate fully without a long ramp-up period.
- It provides a shared reference for all board members on how the organization governs itself, reducing confusion about roles, authorities, and processes.
- It demonstrates organizational maturity to funders, auditors, and peer organizations who ask about governance practices.
- It reduces over-reliance on institutional memory held by a few long-serving individuals — when those people leave, the handbook holds what they knew.

What a handbook is not:

- It is not a substitute for orientation. Reading a handbook does not replace a real conversation about the organization, its culture, and what board service actually requires.
- It is not a strategic plan. The handbook may reference the strategic plan, but it is a governance document, not a direction-setting one.
- It is not a legal document. Policies included in or referenced by the handbook have legal weight; the handbook itself is a reference tool.
- It is not static. A handbook that is not updated at least annually becomes misleading rather than useful.

Format and Access: Before You Build

Before deciding what goes in the handbook, decide how it will be maintained and accessed. The format question determines how easy updates are and how likely board members are to actually use it.

Format	What to know
Digital (board portal or shared drive)	Easy to update, always current, accessible anywhere, searchable. Best practice for most organizations.

PDF distributed by email	Simple to share but becomes outdated quickly. Board members may not know they have an old version.
Physical binder	Tangible and easy to hand to someone. Expensive to update. Rarely current. Not recommended as the primary format.
Board management software (BoardEffect, Boardable, etc.)	Purpose-built for this. Integrates handbook with meeting materials and member communications. Worth the investment for boards that will use it.

Section-by-Section Content Guide

The following sections represent a complete, well-organized board handbook. Not every organization will need every section — use this as a menu, not a mandatory template. Each section card shows what to include and why it earns its place.

SECTION 01

WELCOME AND ORIENTATION

Sets the tone and helps new members understand the purpose of the handbook

Include:

- Welcome letter from the board chair
- Brief message from the executive director
- How to use this handbook
- Who to contact with questions (board chair, ED, board secretary)
- Overview of what to expect in the first 90 days

Why this matters: New board members are often overwhelmed at the start. A warm, human opening that tells them what they are holding and who to call makes the rest of the document more accessible.

SECTION 02

ORGANIZATIONAL OVERVIEW

Grounds every board member in the mission, history, and current state of the organization

Include:

- Mission, vision, and values statements
- Brief organizational history (1–2 pages)
- Current strategic plan or summary of strategic priorities
- Theory of change or program overview
- Organizational chart: board, senior staff, and program structure
- Key facts: founding year, budget size, staff count, geographic reach, populations served

Why this matters: Board members make better decisions when they understand the organization deeply. This section is especially important for members who joined without prior knowledge of the work.

SECTION 03

GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE

Explains how the board is organized, how it makes decisions, and how authority flows

Include:

- Bylaws (full document or link to current version)
- Board composition: size, term lengths, officer roles
- Current board roster with terms, committee assignments, and contact information
- Committee structure: list of committees, chairs, and role descriptions
- Meeting schedule for the current year
- How decisions are made: quorum, voting thresholds, Robert's Rules reference
- Relationship between board and executive director: governance vs. management

Why this matters: Governance confusion is one of the most common and damaging board problems. This section should make it unambiguous how the board is organized and how it functions.

SECTION 04

BOARD MEMBER ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Defines what is expected of every board member, individually and collectively

Include:

- Board member job description
- Legal duties: duty of care, loyalty, and obedience – in plain language
- Meeting attendance expectations
- Committee participation expectations
- Financial giving expectation (give/get or specific amount)
- Fundraising and ambassador role
- Time commitment estimate (hours per month)
- What board members may and may not do: authority limits

Why this matters: Unclear expectations are the root cause of most board member disengagement. This section should make it impossible for a board member to claim they did not know what was expected.

SECTION 05

OFFICER ROLES

Describes the specific responsibilities of each officer position

Include:

- Board chair: responsibilities, relationship with the ED, meeting facilitation
- Vice chair: responsibilities and succession role
- Secretary: meeting minutes, record-keeping, official correspondence
- Treasurer: financial oversight, audit committee, presentation of financials
- Any other officer roles specific to your organization
- How officers are elected and how long they serve

Why this matters: Officers often step into their roles without a clear sense of what they are supposed to do. Written role descriptions reduce ambiguity and support stronger officer performance.

SECTION 06

KEY POLICIES

Provides direct access to the governance policies board members are expected to know and follow

Include:

- Conflict of interest policy (with annual disclosure form)
- Whistleblower protection policy
- Confidentiality policy
- Document retention and destruction policy
- Social media and media relations policy
- Gift acceptance policy
- Any other board-level policies adopted by your organization

Why this matters: Board members cannot comply with policies they cannot find. Including them in the handbook – or linking to current versions – removes that excuse and demonstrates that governance is taken seriously.

SECTION 07

FINANCIAL OVERVIEW

Gives board members the context they need to fulfill their financial oversight responsibility

Include:

- Current year board-approved budget
- Most recent audited financial statements or financial review
- Most recent IRS Form 990
- Brief narrative explaining revenue sources and financial health
- Key financial metrics the board monitors
- The board's financial oversight role: what to look for, what questions to ask
- Contact for financial questions (ED, treasurer, or CFO)

Why this matters: Financial oversight is a core legal duty of every board member. Many members lack the financial literacy to exercise it. Accessible financial context with explanation closes that gap.

SECTION 08

FUNDRAISING AND RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

Explains the board's role in sustaining the organization's financial health

Include:

- Overview of the funding model: grants, individual donors, earned revenue, events
- Board giving expectation: amount, timing, and process
- Board fundraising role: what is expected beyond personal giving
- How to make an introduction or referral
- How to participate in donor cultivation and stewardship
- Key funders and donor relationships the board should be aware of
- What board members should never do: approach funders without staff coordination

Why this matters: The board's role in fundraising is one of the most common points of confusion and anxiety. Clear expectations and clear guidance on how to help make board members more effective and more confident.

SECTION 09

MEETING LOGISTICS AND NORMS

Covers the practical information board members need to participate effectively

Include:

- Meeting dates, times, and locations for the current year
- How and when meeting materials are distributed
- Attendance and proxy policy
- How to join remotely, if applicable
- Norms for board meetings: discussion structure, decision-making, consent agenda
- How to place an item on the agenda
- Executive session: when it is used and who participates

Why this matters: Logistics questions consume disproportionate board and staff time when they are not clearly documented. This section answers them once.

SECTION 10

ORGANIZATIONAL CONTACTS AND KEY RELATIONSHIPS

Gives board members the context to navigate organizational relationships appropriately

Include:

- Staff directory with names, titles, and contact information
- Board member directory with terms and committee assignments
- Key external relationships: major funders, government partners, peer organizations
- Legal counsel, auditor, and insurance broker contact information
- Guidance on appropriate board-to-staff contact: when direct contact is appropriate and when to go through the ED

Why this matters: Board members who do not know who to call — or who accidentally bypass appropriate channels by contacting staff directly — create problems that this section can prevent.

Keeping it Current: The Maintenance Plan

A handbook that is not maintained becomes a liability. Outdated rosters, superseded policies, and stale financial documents create confusion and, in some cases, legal risk. Build a maintenance routine into your governance calendar.

Annual review tasks:

- Update board roster with new members, departures, and term dates
- Replace committee lists and assignments with current information
- Confirm all policies are the most recently adopted versions
- Update the meeting schedule for the new year
- Replace financial documents with the most recent budget and statements
- Update org chart if structure has changed
- Refresh the strategic plan summary if the plan has been updated

Assign clear ownership

Someone needs to own the handbook — typically the executive director or board secretary. The owner flags when sections are out of date, coordinates updates, and ensures all board members have access to the current version. Without a named owner, handbooks drift.

Version control

Date the handbook clearly on the cover or first page. When you update it, send a brief note to the full board flagging what changed. Board members should not have to wonder whether they are reading the current version.

How to tell if your handbook needs work:

Ask three board members where they would look to find the conflict of interest policy. If none of them point to the handbook — or if the version they find was superseded two years ago — you have your answer.

Getting Started: A Practical Path Forward

If your organization does not have a board handbook, or has one that has not been updated in years, the task can feel large. It does not have to be.

1	Decide on format and where it will live before you build anything. A handbook no one can find is useless.
2	Gather what already exists: bylaws, policies, board roster, financials, strategic plan. Most handbooks are assembled from documents that already exist, not written from scratch.
3	Use this guide to identify what is missing. Gaps in the handbook usually reflect gaps in organizational infrastructure worth addressing.
4	Draft a table of contents and assign each section to whoever owns that content: ED drafts the org overview, board chair drafts governance, treasurer drafts financials.
5	Set a deadline. Without one, handbook projects stall. A new board member orientation date or governance retreat is a good forcing function.
6	Circulate a draft to the full board before finalizing. Board members often identify gaps or outdated information that staff miss.
7	Put the annual review on the governance calendar before you publish the first version. Maintenance is easier than rebuilding.

Need help building, rebuilding, or facilitating a board conversation around your handbook?

Book a free 30-minute discovery call at www.spiegelconsulting.com — or reach Noah directly at noah@spiegelconsulting.com or 615-997-0944.