BOARD.DEV

Board Technology Leadership

A Playbook for Nonprofit CEOs and Boards

BOARD.DEV, 2026

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What's inside this playbook

FOR A QUICK START

If you read only one section, read Section 4, The Four Areas of Board Technology Leadership. If you are a CEO currently leading this work alone, you can share Section 8, Where to Start, with your board chair this week.

01

Why this playbook, why now

Three years ago, when we wrote the first version of this playbook, the question facing most nonprofit boards was whether technology belonged on their agenda at all. That argument is over. AI has made it impossible to ignore that every nonprofit is now a technology organization, whether or not it has chosen to be one. Staff are using AI tools today. Donors are using AI to research organizations before they give. Funders are starting to ask grantees how they govern AI, not just whether they use it. The decisions are being made; the only question is whether the board is part of them.

88%	⅔	56%
of organizations now use AI in at least one business function, up from 78% a year earlier.	remain stuck in experimentation or pilots, never scaling AI across the enterprise.	surge in AI-related incidents in a single year, as documented by Stanford.

Across the global economy, 88% of organizations now use AI in at least one business function, up from 78% a year earlier. Yet nearly two-thirds remain stuck in experimentation or pilots, never scaling AI across the enterprise. Stanford documented a 56% surge in AI-related incidents in a single year.[2] The pattern is the same everywhere: AI use is outrunning the structures meant to guide it.

The nonprofit version of this pattern is what we built Board.Dev to solve. In our work placing leaders on nonprofit boards, running cohorts, and convening field leaders, one thing has become clear: the biggest constraint on nonprofit progress with technology is not money, tools, or technical talent. It is leadership infrastructure. Boards that engage on technology give their organizations permission to move; boards that don't, don't. This pattern is documented across the field by Bridgespan, the Center for Effective Philanthropy, and our own research with Dell Technologies and TechSoup (*Building the Leadership Nonprofits Need to Make AI Work*).[5]

Staff can start AI. Only boards can scale it.

This playbook is written for the two people who can do something about that: the nonprofit CEO and the board chair.

02

The leadership gap

For most of the last decade, the conversation about nonprofit technology was a budget conversation. Nonprofits underinvest in technology relative to their for-profit peers. Funders won't pay for it. Staff don't have time. Tools are too expensive. Every part of that story has been true at one point or another, and parts of it remain true today. But it is no longer the binding constraint.

The tools have gotten cheaper. The tech-fluent talent market is more accessible. Funders are getting more sophisticated about technology investment, as the Technology Association of Grantmakers and Bridgespan have both documented. The infrastructure question is more solvable now than it was three years ago.

What has not changed, and what now stands as the biggest constraint on nonprofit progress, is the leadership infrastructure: the structures, agendas, language, and shared understanding that allow a CEO and board to make technology decisions together, at the pace those decisions now require.

Across the boards we place on, the cohorts we run, and the convenings we host, we see the same pattern repeat: staff start experimenting, and tools proliferate. Someone raises a question about data, about ethics, about cost, about who's actually accountable, and there is no structure to answer it, so the CEO carries the question alone, or the question gets deferred, or staff make a call that should have been a board call. Months later, the organization has activity but not direction. The TAG survey found this same pattern on the funder side: 81% of foundations use AI, but only 30% have an AI policy in place.[6]

The cost is measurable. IBM's 2025 Cost of a Data Breach Report found that organizations with high levels of shadow AI—staff using tools without organizational oversight—face $670,000 in additional breach costs on average, and that 97% of organizations reporting AI-related breaches lacked basic access controls.[7] For a nonprofit serving vulnerable populations, the reputational cost is often larger than the financial one. And the cost is not only downside; it's missing the potential upside. Bridgespan puts it plainly: "Technology succeeds only when it is resourced as part of an organization's core infrastructure, not treated as a side project or discretionary expense."[3] Organizations without the right leadership infrastructure cannot make the move to tech success.

A discussion or a signature is not the same as understanding. We see boards that have approved AI principles they don't have the expertise or shared language to evaluate, which means governance theater, not governance. Getting a policy signed is not the finish line. The finish line is a board that can hold a real conversation about technology choices, on the same footing it holds conversations about finance and program.

The leadership gap is not a gap in interest. It is not a gap in tools. It is the absence of structure. Closing it is what this playbook is for.

03

What tech-fluent board leadership actually means

The instinct, when a board realizes it needs to engage with technology, is to recruit a technologist. Find a CIO, a startup founder, a data scientist—someone whose job it is to know the answers—and hand them the technology portfolio and let everyone else exhale. This can be helpful, but it's not always the right move, and rarely the only necessary one.

THE IT GUY FALLACY

The assumption that one tech-credentialed board member discharges the board's responsibility on technology. It does not. Technology now runs through every part of the organization—fundraising, programs, HR, finance, communications, compliance—and the decisions it surfaces are leadership decisions, not technical ones. Boards that treat technology as a quarterly briefing rather than a leadership question stay stuck. Recruiting one person to "handle tech" lets the rest of the board off the hook on fluency and concentrates a portfolio that should be shared.

Tech-fluent board leadership means something different. It means a whole board—across all functions, technical and non-technical—with the structured ability to ask the right questions about technology decisions. It's not the ability to evaluate an AI model; it's the ability to ask why this tool, what data does it touch, who is accountable, what happens if it fails, and how we will know whether it worked.

The four capabilities of a tech-fluent leader

Know what good looks like

They have seen modern systems and can benchmark an organization's maturity against current practice.

Ask the right questions

About data strategy, about AI, about build versus buy, about how something will scale.

Translate two languages

They can help a board understand technology decisions without needing everything explained from scratch.

Have informed intuition

They know when to push for more investment, when something is overhyped, and when the organization is falling behind.

A tech-fluent leader, in our definition, has four capabilities. They know what good looks like—they have seen modern systems and can benchmark an organization's maturity against current practice. They ask the right questions—about data strategy, about AI, about build versus buy, about how something will scale. They translate between technology and business—they can help a board understand technology decisions without needing everything explained from scratch. And they have informed intuition—they know when to push for more investment, when something is overhyped, and when the organization is falling behind.

This definition has three implications for how boards should think about themselves.

First, it broadens who counts. Tech-fluent leaders sit across every function: a CFO who has implemented modern financial systems and understands what AI means for forecasting and reporting. A general counsel who has navigated data privacy frameworks and AI liability questions. A CHRO who has deployed people analytics and thought hard about AI in hiring. A marketing leader who understands attribution, data privacy, and what AI does to content. A program leader who has built tech-enabled service delivery and thought about digital equity. Tech fluency is not a tech-company credential; it is hands-on experience with technology decisions in a leader's domain.

Second, it raises the bar for everyone on the board. Just as every board member is expected to engage with finance—to read the audit, to understand the budget, to push on the assumptions—every board member now needs baseline fluency on technology. That does not mean technical training. It means enough fluency to recognize when a decision requires board-level attention, to interrogate the assumptions in a staff recommendation, and to know what good looks like.

Third, it changes what success looks like. A tech-fluent board is not one that approves technology policy; it is one that asks better questions before the policies arrive. The work is upstream of the document.

A SIMPLE TEST WE USE AT BOARD.DEV

If this person joined a nonprofit board and the executive director asked, "Should we invest in AI for our programs?", could they help lead that conversation and help the board make a decision? If yes, they are tech-fluent. If they would defer the whole conversation to "a real tech person," they are not.

The 2023 version of this playbook recommended adding a named tech seat to the board. We have moved away from that recommendation. The strategy now is whole-board fluency, built deliberately, across functions.

04

The four areas of board technology leadership

A nonprofit board has the same fiduciary obligations as a corporate board: care, loyalty, and obedience. The difference is that mission, not margin, is the measure of whether the board is doing its job. Technology leadership does not add a fifth duty. It runs through the four areas every board already governs: strategy and vision, risk and ethics, resources and talent, and community and impact. Each area below names the decisions a board needs to own, and ends with questions for your next board meeting.

1 Strategy and Vision

The board's first job is to ensure the organization has direction, not just activity. In a technology context, that means owning the question of which technology investments advance the mission, how data and AI fit into the strategic plan, and whether the organization is building, buying, partnering, or waiting, and why.

The decisions live at the level of strategy, not tools. Where could technology—including but not limited to AI—expand reach, cut friction, or unlock capacity? What is the cost of not acting? Is there a tech roadmap, and does it connect to the strategic plan, or is it running in parallel? Are program decisions and technology decisions made together, or separately?

The hardest version of this conversation is about workflows. McKinsey's research on AI value capture found that fundamental workflow redesign correlates more strongly with value than any other organizational change, and that the vast majority of organizations using AI have done no workflow redesign at all. They are layering technology on top of processes that should have been rethought.[1] For a nonprofit, the question is the same. The board's job is to push management past "how do we use AI to do what we already do, faster" toward "what should we be doing differently?"

QUESTIONS FOR YOUR NEXT BOARD MEETING

- ? Where would technology most materially advance our mission in the next two years?
- ? What is the cost to us of not acting?
- ? Are our technology decisions connected to the strategic plan, or running parallel to it?
- ? Have we asked which of our workflows should be redesigned, not just sped up?
- ? Build, buy, or partner—what is our default, and is it the right one?

2 Risk and Ethics

Managing risk is a core board responsibility. In a technology context, it requires digital fluency. The board sets the ethical and legal standards for the use of data and technology, balancing risk—legal, reputational, cyber, regulatory—with impact.

The decisions: What will we and won't we do with data and AI? What guardrails apply to staff use of AI tools? How do we protect the people whose data we hold—employees, donors, beneficiaries, partners? What is our cybersecurity posture, and how often does the board see it? How do we manage vendor risk, especially with AI-powered vendors whose practices we cannot fully audit? How would we know if something went wrong, and who is accountable?

The risk landscape for nonprofits has changed. AI-related incidents jumped 56% in 2024. Shadow AI—staff using tools the organization has not sanctioned—accounted for one in five breaches in 2025, and 97% of AI-related breaches happened at organizations without proper access controls. Most boards have not yet absorbed how fast this has moved.

Risk is not only cybersecurity. For nonprofits, the ethical considerations can be the bigger complication. Data about beneficiaries is held in a fiduciary trust the board guarantees. AI tools deployed in service delivery—intake, triage, eligibility, case management—can quietly replicate the biases the mission exists to counter. The board's job is to know what tools are being used, on whose data, and with what safeguards.

QUESTIONS FOR YOUR NEXT BOARD MEETING

- ? Do we have written principles for our use of data and AI? When did the board last discuss them?
- ? What technology tools are staff using right now, sanctioned or not?
- ? How do we categorize our data by sensitivity, and what controls apply to each tier?
- ? Who would do what, in what order, if we had a data incident?
- ? What's the last time the board reviewed our cybersecurity posture?

3 Resources and Talent

The board's job is to ensure the organization has what it needs—money, people, partnerships—to execute. In a technology context, that means asking whether the technology budget is proportionate to the ambition, whether staff have the skills and time, and whether vendor and partnership relationships are managed well.

The decisions: Is technology treated as core infrastructure or as a discretionary line item? Where are we leaving pro bono, discounted, or partnership resources on the table? Who owns technology inside the organization, and do they have the authority to act? What is our approach to vendor selection, build versus buy, and partnerships? Are we investing in staff fluency, or assuming people will figure it out?

Reframing is often part of the work. As long as technology is treated as an operating cost, or a new expense to be approved or denied, it will be deprioritized by organizations running lean. As soon as it is treated as cost recovery—a way to reclaim hours staff are currently losing to manual work—the conversation changes. Bridgespan documents the difference plainly: organizations that treat technology as core infrastructure get returns. Organizations that treat it as a side project don't.[3]

The talent question is the underappreciated one. Staff who are not developing fluency in their current roles will seek it elsewhere. SHRM estimates the cost of replacing a mid-level employee at 50-200% of annual salary, and most of that cost is institutional knowledge that walks out the door.[8] Investing in staff fluency is a retention strategy, not a perk.

QUESTIONS FOR YOUR NEXT BOARD MEETING

- ? Who owns technology inside our organization, and do they have the time and authority to act?
- ? Is our technology budget proportionate to the ambition, or is it sized as overhead?
- ? What pro bono, partnership, or discounted resources are available that we are not using?
- ? Are we investing in staff fluency, or assuming people will figure it out?
- ? What's our build, buy, or partner default, and is it the right one for our scale?

4 Community and Impact

The board's final area is the one that distinguishes mission-driven governance from corporate governance: who benefits, and who might be left out. In a technology context, that means asking whether technology serves the people the organization exists to serve, and whether it widens or narrows the gaps that already exist.

The decisions: Who benefits from our technology use, and whose voice was missing when we chose it? Are our tools accessible to the beneficiaries we serve, or do they assume a baseline of digital access we cannot guarantee? Are we using AI in ways that could replicate or amplify the biases the mission exists to counter? How do we measure whether technology is advancing our impact, not just our internal efficiency?

The risks here are well-documented and disproportionately affect the populations nonprofits exist to serve. NIST's 2019 study of 189 facial recognition systems documented significant bias against people of African and Asian descent, particularly women.[9] Algorithmic bias in hiring, lending, healthcare triage, and benefits eligibility has been documented across systems trained on data that underrepresents marginalized groups. For a nonprofit, deploying an off-the-shelf AI tool without asking these questions is not neutral. It is a delegation of mission-critical decisions to a system the board has not evaluated.

The opportunities are real, too. Technology has enabled organizations to translate content into many more languages, cut response times for crisis lines, build more responsive service delivery. The deciding factor is intent: whether the organization brought the people it serves into the conversation about what the technology should do, and what it should never do.

This is also where the board's external networks earn their keep. Cross-sector relationships, peer organizations, partnerships with funders and corporates—these are the channels through which a board can ask "who else is building this, and what have they learned about who gets left out?"

QUESTIONS FOR YOUR NEXT BOARD MEETING

- ? Whose voice was missing when we chose our current technology tools?
- ? Could the tools we use today produce biased outcomes against the populations we serve? How would we know?
- ? Are we measuring whether technology is advancing our impact, not just our efficiency?
- ? Are the digital channels we rely on actually accessible to the people we serve?
- ? Who in our network is further along on this, and what can we learn from them?

05

Board posture: leading, supporting, informed

Before a board can change how it engages with technology, it needs to know where it is starting. There are three postures a board can take on any area of governance—leading, supporting, or informed—and the one most nonprofit boards take on technology, by default, is informed.

Leading	Leading means the board sets direction, owns the strategy, and holds the CEO accountable for execution. The board doesn't write the policy, but it knows what's in it, why, and what it requires of the organization. This is the posture most boards take on finance and on hiring the CEO.
Supporting	Supporting means the board engages actively with management's direction. The board doesn't initiate, but it interrogates, advises, opens networks, and helps the organization stress-test its thinking. This is the posture most boards take on fundraising and major programmatic shifts.
Informed	Informed means the board is briefed but not active. Staff bring updates; the board listens. This is appropriate for tactical matters, like vendor selection, software upgrades, day-to-day operations.

The trouble is that most nonprofit boards have settled at "informed" on technology by default, without having decided that's the right posture. The board's posture has been set passively, by the absence of structure rather than by an active choice. "Informed" as a permanent state on technology is an oversight gap. It worked when technology was a back-office function. It does not work when technology is reshaping fundraising, service delivery, talent strategy, and the cost structure of the organization simultaneously.

Most boards we work with need to move from informed to supporting on technology overall, with leading on a subset of decisions—principles, major investments, significant risk. That is not a heavy lift, but it requires the board to choose it.

THE DIAGNOSTIC QUESTION

On technology, are we leading, supporting, or informed? And is that the posture we would consciously choose if we were designing the board from scratch today?

06

Building the capability

There are three paths to building tech-fluent board leadership. Most organizations need some combination of all three.

1 Activate the board you have

Many boards already have more capability than they're using, so the best first step is often structural. Put technology on a standing board agenda—not as a one-off briefing but as a recurring conversation about strategy, risk, resources, and impact. Add a standing tech report to board meetings, alongside the finance report. Develop a board learning agenda: an article a month, a guest speaker each quarter, a half-day session each year to go deeper.

Look for tech fluency that you have in seat and may not have noticed. The board member who has run marketing operations and navigated AI; the one in finance who has seen what technology is doing to audit and reporting; the general counsel who has lived privacy and AI liability. Activating existing fluency is faster than recruiting new fluency.

Build literacy across the whole board, not just the people with technology credentials. Use the four-area frame to give every board member a way to engage. The CFO does not need to evaluate a model; she needs to ask the right resource questions. The community-impact board member does not need to write principles; he needs to ask who is being left out.

2 Recruit tech-fluent leaders across functions

When you do need to recruit, the question is not "who is the tech person" but "where is the function-specific gap, and who can fill it with tech fluency?" You might engage a CFO who has built AI into a finance organization, a CHRO who has implemented AI in hiring with rigorous bias testing, a general counsel who has lived through emerging regulation, a marketing leader who has built data infrastructure, or a program leader who has used technology to serve more people better.

Get clear on the function and the seniority level before naming individuals. A board that needs strategy support should recruit differently than one that needs risk support. Then use standard tools—your network, your current board's first-degree LinkedIn connections, corporate partners, peer organizations—to find candidates. Organizations like Board.Dev exist to make this easier.

3 Bring in structured support

Sometimes, the best path involves external expertise. The board does not need to figure this out alone. Board.Dev offers a readiness diagnostic, cohort programs, and direct consultation for nonprofits ready to go deeper. The broader field of board-level technology support is still emerging—most of what exists today was built by Board.Dev—but funders are starting to pay attention.

> **The boards that progress fastest combine all three paths. They activate the fluency they have, recruit deliberately to close specific gaps, and bring in structured support to accelerate the work.**

07

The cost of waiting

Most nonprofit boards understand the case for engaging with technology. What they have not done is calculated the cost of not engaging. Once they do, the conversation usually changes. Boards that stay at "informed" on technology lose on four fronts.

01

Credibility with funders

Funders are getting more sophisticated about technology. The TAG survey signaled the direction; the Center for Effective Philanthropy and Bridgespan have followed.[4] Organizations that cannot demonstrate basic governance of technology—sanctioned tools, written principles, board fluency—will increasingly take second place to peers who can. The question on grant applications has not yet appeared on most cover sheets. It will.

02

Decision-making speed

When the board is not part of the conversation, every technology decision either escalates inappropriately or gets made without the oversight it requires. Both outcomes are slow, and neither produce the right results. The organizations we see moving fastest are not the ones with the most resources. They are the ones whose CEOs and boards have built the muscle to make technology decisions together, at the pace those decisions require.

03

Staff retention

Staff who are not building fluency in their current roles will seek it elsewhere. This is most acute among mid-level program and data staff for whom technology literacy is becoming a core professional skill. SHRM puts the cost of replacing a mid-level employee at 50-200% of annual salary.[8] Tech stagnation rarely shows up in exit interviews, but it shows up in turnover.

04

Real risk

Shadow AI is in your organization right now. Every organization we work with finds it when they look. Without sanctioned tools, principles, and board awareness, every staff member is making an individual risk calculation in isolation. IBM's data on AI-related breaches tells the financial story.[7] The reputational story for a nonprofit serving vulnerable populations is heavier.

We have modeled the full economic cost of inaction for a mid-sized nonprofit in our research with Dell Technologies and TechSoup. The headline is that the cost of waiting compounds annually, and it is larger than most boards have calculated.

> **The conversation a board needs to have is not whether to invest in technology leadership. It is what the organization is losing every quarter it does not.**

08

Where to start

Board.Dev offers assessments, cohort programs, board placement across all functions, the Signals newsletter, and the annual Nonprofit Tech Governance Congress as paths into the deeper work. Visit board.dev for any of it.

IF YOU ARE A CEO

Do this week

1. **Forward this playbook to your board chair.** Ask for thirty minutes to talk through where the board sits on the four areas in Section 4—and where it should sit.
2. **Audit what technology is already being used at your organization.** You do not need a formal review. Send three emails to your senior team asking what tools they personally use and what they would want sanctioned. The list will tell you where your governance gap actually is.
3. **Put technology on your next board agenda.** Not as a presentation, but as a working conversation, structured around the four areas. Use the questions at the end of each area in Section 4 as a starting point.

IF YOU ARE A BOARD CHAIR

Do this week

1. **Ask your CEO for a one-page brief on technology activity at the organization.** What staff are using, what is sanctioned, what principles exist. The answer will tell you how much work is in front of you.
2. **Identify the tech fluency you already have on the board.** Across all functions. Marketing, finance, legal, HR, operations, communications. Most boards underestimate this.
3. **Decide the board's posture on technology.** Leading, supporting, or informed. If it is informed by default and not by choice, change it.
4. **Open the conversation with your CEO** about what board engagement on technology should look like over the next year. Not a one-time briefing. A recurring engagement.

Section 6 describes longer-term work to build capability, but you can tackle some of the actions above in weeks. Start there.

09

About Board.Dev

Board.Dev strengthens nonprofits by equipping boards with tech-fluent leadership, and helps companies grow disruption-ready leaders through real-world board experience.

Founded in 2024 by Alethea Hannemann and Aaron Hurst, we build on a decade of work in cross-sector capacity-building and the architecture of the pro bono service movement. Our work spans board placement across all functions, AI leadership cohorts for nonprofits, decision intensives for corporate teams, the annual Nonprofit Tech Governance Congress, and the Signals newsletter. We are fiscally sponsored through Community Initiatives, a 501(c)(3). Our work has been featured in the Stanford Social Innovation Review and the Chronicle of Philanthropy.

Alethea Hannemann

CEO & CO-FOUNDER

Alethea Hannemann brings two decades of experience in cross-sector capacity-building, including a decade at the Taproot Foundation building national programs that delivered hundreds of millions in pro bono services to nonprofits and social enterprises. She has advised social impact teams at Okta, Google, and Splunk, served as COO of a $25M food access nonprofit, and co-authored *Powered by Pro Bono* with Aaron Hurst.

Aaron Hurst

CO-FOUNDER & CHAIR

Aaron Hurst is a serial social-sector entrepreneur. He founded the Taproot Foundation, catalyzing the $15 billion pro bono service market, and founded and led Imperative. He serves on multiple nonprofit boards and advised LinkedIn on its member board placement strategy. He is the coauthor of *Powered by Pro Bono* and *The Purpose Economy*, and an Ashoka, Draper Richards Kaplan, and Manhattan Institute fellow.

Corporate partners

Our corporate partners include Okta (founding partner), Dell Technologies, Morgan Stanley, CDW, and others working with us to build tech-fluent leadership across the nonprofit sector.

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