

# Organizational Assessment Resource

*for Senior-Level Leaders*



A Quick-Guide

*“Assessment is essential because it helps you understand how the organization works and what its capabilities are.”*

—John Morse, Director of Horticulture, Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden

# Congratulations on your new position!

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To effect change as a leader, you must understand the organization you're leading. Prioritizing organizational assessment is an imperative and can help you capitalize on that brief time when you see your organization through a newcomer's eyes.

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**This quick-guide provides you with the why, what, and how of organizational assessment. It can help you understand your organization's culture, staff, and board through observing, asking questions, and listening.**

## Things to Keep in Mind:

**Challenge yourself**  
to be self-aware

**Record impressions**  
and observations

**Be aware of your biases** and how they may influence your decisions

**Know your leadership style** and how it may impact your team

**Cultivate relationships;** they are the key to success—yours and others'

**Find support** from people in your network

**Share your findings** and be transparent with results

Use the assessment to **identify early wins**

Record information as you go and **regularly reflect** on findings

Realize assessment is an **ongoing process**

# This Guide Focuses on Three Main Areas:

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**Organizational culture** – visible physical features, values and beliefs, basic underlying assumptions, unwritten rules and standards

**Individual staff** – professional skills, competencies, personal characteristics

**The Board** – composition, expectations, level of engagement, culture, committees, overall effectiveness

## Other Assessment Topics:

### **Documents and publications** –

charter, strategic and master plans, personnel and policy manuals, bylaws, mission, vision, value statements, annual reports, newsletters, meeting minutes, websites

### **External stakeholders**

– neighbors, community members and leaders, visitors, competitors, partners, vendors, chambers of commerce, government entities, other relevant institutions

**Finances** – fiscal capacity, financial history and policies, investments, compensation structure, endowments, budgets

### **One's own abilities**

– personal strengths, weaknesses, challenges, aspirations, opportunities, character, habits, tendencies

### **Organizational reputation**

– internet reviews, community perception, staff satisfaction, member commitment, surveys

### **Organizational structure**

– organizational chart, observation of relationships

**Resources** – infrastructure, utilities, property, collections, supplies, equipment

**Teams** – cross-departmental committees, departments, focus groups, direct reports, senior teams

# Organizational Culture

visible physical features, values and beliefs, basic underlying assumptions, unwritten rules and standards

## The Basics

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What is  
organizational  
culture?

**Culture is the combination of the founder's intentions and beliefs, individual and collective behavior, and organizational traditions, artifacts, and values.**

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Why should  
you assess  
culture?

Assessing culture offers context for understanding your new organization. It provides a history of why and how work has been done and can identify areas to improve.

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“Culture in essence  
means ‘the way we  
do things.’”

Rick King, Chairman, Kittleman & Associates, LLC

## Organize Your Findings

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Gather, study,  
and reflect on:

**Visible Physical Features, Documents, and Processes** including tangible items and documents you can see, such as building architecture, office space and design, technology, branding materials, policies and procedures, annual reports, and observable rituals and ceremonies

**Values and Beliefs** including written mission, vision, and values statements, goals, philosophies, and aspirations of the organization

**Basic Underlying Assumptions, Unwritten Rules and Standards** including unconscious beliefs, habits, and assumed values of the employees

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“It is a requirement,  
not a benefit, that  
you do a cultural  
assessment.”

Rick King, Chairman, Kittleman & Associates, LLC

## Start with Questions

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Observe,  
ask questions,  
and listen:

- How are decisions made in the organization?
- How would you describe the level of transparency?
- Has the mission ever been revisited?
- Tell us about a big change in the organization. How did people react?
- How are expectations communicated to you?
- If the organization had a slogan, what would it be?
- What is something about the organization that you would only know by working here?
- Does the organization have a stated group of shared values? If so, how were they developed?
- Who are the primary set of influencers in the organization?
- How would you describe the culture of each department?
- How would you describe your own and your department's contribution to the mission?
- Are there opportunities for growth within the organization?
- How does the organization view continual learning?
- How are staff evaluated and rewarded?
- How is risk viewed?

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“I met with every staff member individually when I started. The themes and concerns were consistent, so I was able to identify them quickly.”

Tabitha Schmidt, President & CEO, Powell Gardens





# Individual Staff

professional skills, competencies,  
personal characteristics

## The Basics

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Why assess staff?

**Assessing staff allows you to determine whether the right people are in the right positions.**

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It can reveal:

- How individual staff are currently contributing to mission accomplishment
- How those same staff could function to their highest potential given the requisite resources
- Urgent issues and gaps in delivering mission
- Staff strengths and areas for improvement
- Potential leaders and influencers
- Sources of institutional knowledge
- Morale and well-being of staff
- How much trust exists and where it needs to be built

“How you assess  
people should  
be based on  
their ability to  
help achieve the  
mission.”

Michael Marquardt, EdD, Professor Emeritus,  
George Washington University

## Where to Focus

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### How to assess individual staff?

- Consider use of standardized staff self-assessments.
- Read documents that relate to a role and an individual's performance.
- Use the organizational chart to plan one-to-ones, follow hierarchy, plan vertically and horizontally.
- Consider the formality of the meeting's setting.

“Take the time to talk about hopes and dreams. Developing a rapport which isn’t about stringent business topics can help bring someone into a visionary space.”

Stephanie Jutila, President & CEO,  
Greater Des Moines Botanical Garden

## Get to Know Your Staff

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Questions to ask individuals about themselves:

**Ask a lot of questions, listen actively, ask follow-up questions, and learn. Tailor questions to the individual and to organizational priorities. Open-ended questions may allow for more thoughtful and revealing answers.**

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- How would you describe your job?
- What are you working on now?
- What are the challenges of your job?
- Tell me about your professional background.
- What motivates you in your work?
- What are some of your greatest accomplishments?
- What would you list as your top skills?
- Do you have skills you'd like to improve upon to help achieve the organization's goals?
- What are your short-term and long-term goals?
- Are your individual goals in the organization clear to you?
- What are you doing when time flies?
- What hobbies and interests do you have?

“Show that you are open and interested in all the different responses.”

Adam Schwerner, Director of Horticulture and Resort Enhancement, Disneyland Resort

# Individual Staff Assessment

## Professional Skills

- Expert knowledge \_\_\_\_\_
- Capabilities \_\_\_\_\_
- Strengths \_\_\_\_\_
- Education \_\_\_\_\_
- Experience \_\_\_\_\_

## Competencies

- Leadership aptitude \_\_\_\_\_
- Decision-making skills \_\_\_\_\_
- Communication skills \_\_\_\_\_
- Creativity and vision \_\_\_\_\_
- Problem-solving ability \_\_\_\_\_

## Personal Characteristics

- Integrity \_\_\_\_\_
- Transparency \_\_\_\_\_
- Openness \_\_\_\_\_
- Honesty \_\_\_\_\_
- Empathy \_\_\_\_\_
- Values \_\_\_\_\_
- Motivation \_\_\_\_\_
- Ambition \_\_\_\_\_

“Figure out what competencies you need and then determine if you have them.”

Bryan Garey, Vice President for Human Resources,  
Virginia Tech

## Individual Views Matter

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Questions to ask an individual about the organization:

**Ask the questions below to understand the individual's perspective of the organization**

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- Whom do you work with?
- Who does what and what are they working on at the moment?
- How is your department organized?
- How do you see this department moving forward?
- How would you describe the organization?
- What's special about this organization?
- What excites or frustrates you about the organization?
- What do you see as the biggest challenges the organization is facing?
- Why is the organization facing, or going to face, these challenges?
- How could the organization turn these challenges into opportunities?
- What are the most promising unexploited opportunities for growth?

“Make it a learning experience. Ask what are the strengths and talents we need to improve upon to achieve our organization’s goals.”

Michael Marquardt, EdD, Professor Emeritus,  
George Washington University





# The Board

composition, expectations, level of engagement, culture, committees, overall effectiveness

## The Basics

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Why should you assess the board?

A board's fiduciary duties and responsibility for oversight means that, collectively, the board is in charge. An assessment helps to **understand the expectations** of the board and build a strong partnership.

The board **provides continuity**; while individual board members come and go, the board as an entity remains. Assessing the board helps to evaluate whether good practices have been institutionalized.

It is particularly important to **build a relationship** between the CEO and the board chair; an assessment helps a leader to enter into this relationship more effectively.

“It is important to recognize the composition and conditions for the board that are most conducive to success.”

Keith Nevison, Manager of Farm and Nursery Operations,  
Thomas Jefferson Foundation at Monticello

## Where to Focus

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What should you assess?

**Board composition:** who are its members; what is its diversity; what are the committees, the skills, the potential gaps in skills?

**Board engagement:** are its members committed, passionate, respectful, mission-driven, forward-thinking?

**Board expectations:** how does the board define the roles and responsibilities of the CEO; what are the board's expectations for the organization?

**Board culture:** how does the board work together as a whole?

**Board effectiveness:** does the board work to a standard of excellence?

“The board sets the tone and direction for the organization; your success and that of the organization relies on its strength. The best relationship between the board and CEO is a partnership.”

Susan Detwiler, President, The Detwiler Group

## Understand the Board Members

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When meeting with individual board members, CEOs seek to:

- Identify the individual's strengths and skills
- Understand their expectations of you as CEO
- Investigate their level of engagement with the board, and with the organization
- Identify which members are the early adopters of new ideas
- Recognize which members have the respect of, and influence over, others on the board
- Understand how well the individual works with other board members

“Find out who the early adopters and your champions are, and regularly maintain those relationships.”

Stephanie Jutila, President & CEO,  
Greater Des Moines Botanical Garden

## Get to Know the Individuals

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Questions to ask  
individual board  
members:

- What drew you to support the organization?
- What about the organization makes you feel most satisfied?
- What would you like to see the organization do better?
- In what way would you like to contribute to the organization?
- What are the most important things I need to know about the organization?
- What headline about this organization would you most like to see?
- What headline about this organization would you least like to see?
- What is the biggest gap between what the organization claims it is and what it actually is?
- What are the biggest challenges the organization is facing and why?
- What do you hope will be strikingly different about the organization in five years?
- On what list of your own creation would you like this organization to rank at the top?

“Assessing a board,  
you want to know  
how each member  
relates to the others.”

Adriana Quiñones, Executive Director,  
Cape Fear Botanical Garden

## Elements of Board Culture

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### Life Cycle

Where is the board in its life cycle? Early in the cycle, operational board members take on roles that staff would normally do. A mature organization's board will ideally have transitioned to a role of governance.

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### Member Cycle

Where is the board in its member cycle? Boards often have limited appointment terms for members, usually outlined in the bylaws.

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### Committees

What are the board committees and how do they operate? Group interactions and dynamics can be observed in committee meetings.

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### Composition

What is the balance and diversity of the board?

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### Performance

Is the board operating at an exceptional level? It is worth assessing whether the board is aware of and guided by published standards of excellence.

“Published standards are a good reference to check against for alignment with policies, procedures, and behavioral best practices.”

Gerard T. Donnelly, PhD, President & CEO,  
The Morton Arboretum

## Decode Board Culture

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Questions to  
ask the board  
as a group:

- Has the board carried out a recent self-assessment?
- How does the board make decisions?
- How would you describe the diversity of the board?
- What are the most important things I need to know about the organization?
- Tell me about the organization's values.
- What is the biggest gap between what the organization claims it is and what it actually is?
- Tell me about the last time the organization made a big change.
- What are the biggest challenges the organization is facing and why?
- Where can the organization improve?
- What can the organization attain?
- What headline about this organization would you most like to see?
- What headline about this organization would you least like to see?
- What do you hope will be most strikingly different about the organization in five years?
- On what list of your own creation would you like this organization to rank at the top?

“I do not look for  
unanimity from  
a board, but rather  
a balance.”

Ari Novy, PhD, President & CEO,  
San Diego Botanic Garden





# Longwood Gardens Fellows Program

## The Program

The Longwood Fellows Program is a fully funded 13-month residential living and working experience that further develops high-potential individuals' leadership aptitude and skills.

## The Project

This topic was identified as an important issue by professionals across the public horticulture industry at the 2018 American Public Gardens Association annual conference. The information presented in this quick-guide was gathered through interviews of global public garden leaders and subject experts over a 7-month period in 2018–2019. It is a summary of the most salient research findings, presented in an easy-to-use format. The complete document can be found at [longwoodgardens.org/fellows-cohort-projects](http://longwoodgardens.org/fellows-cohort-projects).

## The 2018–2019 Fellows

### Sadie Barber

On sabbatical from her role as Senior Horticulturist, Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, UK

### Eleanor Gould

Formerly Curator of Gardens at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, Charlottesville, Virginia, USA

### Erin Hefner

Formerly Visitor Services and Resource Specialist, The Polly Hill Arboretum, Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, USA

### Chelsea Mahaffey

Formerly Conservatory Horticulturist, Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden, Richmond, Virginia, USA

### Caroline Tait

On sabbatical from her role as Nursery Manager, Coton Manor Garden, Northamptonshire, UK, and owner of Caroline Tait Design, UK

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