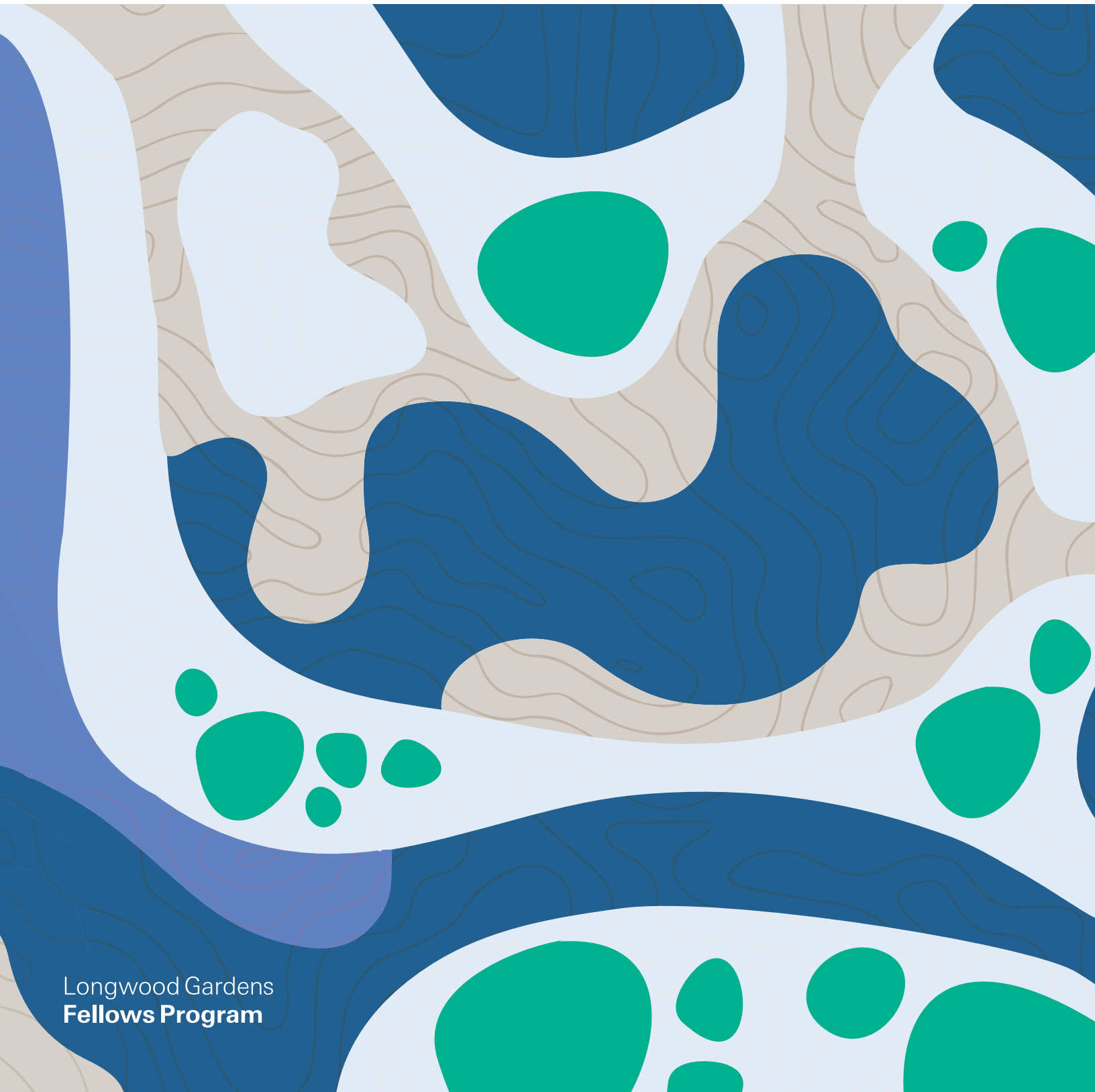


Organizational Assessment Resource

for Senior-Level Leaders



“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

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Introduction

Assessment

To effect change as a leader in any industry, one must understand the organization being led. Assessment is the gathering of institutional information in order to inform action in one's job.

As senior-level leaders consider new jobs, they should begin the ongoing process, prior to an interview, of assessing the organization: reviewing the organization's published data or website, and informally interviewing people about the organization. When a job offer is accepted, prioritizing an organizational assessment is an imperative; it capitalizes on that brief time when one sees the organization through a newcomer's eyes. The assessment can then be used to measure alignment with mission, vision, and strategic plan—the overall direction of the organization. The goal is to gain comprehensive institutional information with which to make informed decisions to propel the organization forward.

“In order to assess anything, you need to know the vision of the organization. The assessment, if done in a vacuum, doesn't get you too far.”

Ed Moydell, Executive Director, Bloedel Reserve

Challenges

Despite its value, organizational assessment comes with challenges. The opportunity to become a new leader in a new position doesn't happen often, and making the initial assessment is a process not quickly or easily mastered. The sheer amount of information to gather and interpret can be overwhelming. Processing the information strategically and knowing what to do with it isn't necessarily intuitive; this resource supports that process.

About this resource

This resource provides a framework that senior-level leaders can use to assess their organizations. It offers specific reasoning, definitions, and strategies—the why, what, and how—for topics that are both challenging and important: organizational culture, individual staff, and the board. Each topic is nuanced, yet related, because each, at its core, relates to people. These assessment strategies are based on experiences of garden leaders from around the world, whose quotes are intended to guide and inspire the reader.

“I'm very much a believer that you need to take time to understand the board, culture, and individuals before you can see what's working well, and understand areas that need to be adapted to better fit the direction the organization is going.”

Kevin Reid, Director of Horticulture, Learning and Estates, Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh

Introduction

Intended audience

This guide supports professionals taking on senior-level positions, such as chief or executive level, vice president roles, or department heads. Those striving toward such roles are also encouraged to use this information, as succession planning and leadership at all levels are necessary for organizational success.

Depending on one's specific leadership position, a senior-level leader may assess certain topics more critically than others. For example, a chief executive officer (CEO), more so than leaders in other positions, would assess the board. A chief financial or development officer would likely scrutinize the finances. However, understanding an organization's environment or culture is necessary for any leadership position, so a review of the essential topics is recommended for all.

Background

Research began at the June 2018 American Public Gardens Association annual conference, "Cultivate Your Creative Nature." The authors hosted a poster session soliciting suggestions for leadership topics to address within the field of public horticulture. The breadth of the feedback led to the realization that a leader must know one's organization to best facilitate change. This led to a study to find out what actions a senior-level leader must take to achieve such understanding. The authors surveyed and interviewed global public garden leaders and content experts to determine key areas of assessment that would help leaders have the greatest positive impact in their positions.

Essential Organizational Topics

While this study found many essential organizational topics that new leaders should understand, this guide focuses on three that were deemed ‘most important’ and ‘most challenging’ to assess: **organizational culture, individual staff, and the board.**

Organizational
culture

Examine the combination of visible physical features, values and beliefs, basic underlying assumptions, unwritten rules and standards that contribute to the unique environment of an organization

Individual staff

Learn about professional skills, competencies, and personal characteristics as they pertain to the organization’s mission

The Board

Determine the governing body’s provision of oversight, composition, expectations, level of engagement, culture, committees, and overall effectiveness

Essential Organizational Topics

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

Approach Assessments With a Leadership Lens

Assessments are critical for success within an organization.

Keep these concepts in mind while assessing:

Challenge yourself to be self-aware; it is essential to leadership success. Self-awareness is being conscious of your strengths while acknowledging what you have yet to learn. Reflecting on and learning from experiences deepens your understanding of who you are. Self-awareness enlightens you to your own skills, competencies, and characteristics, and informs what you and others need to develop to strengthen the organization.

Record impressions and observations; having a journal to jot down observations or questions can be a valuable tool, since impressions change over time. Such observations can shed light on trends in the organization.

“Keep a ‘first impressions’ journal and then review it every year.”

Jean M. Franczyk, President & CEO, Chicago Botanic Garden †

Be aware of your biases and how they may influence your decisions. Approach a situation with an open mind and a willingness to hear new ideas.

“As you spend time getting to know individuals don’t be reactive, listen, and leave the personal bias at the door.”

Doug Conley, Garden Coordinator, Matthaei Botanical Gardens & Nichols Arboretum

A fresh perspective has the benefit of providing a relatively objective lens for assessment.

“When you first enter an organization, you come in with a fresh perspective and that’s a great position to be in to analyze and assess.”

Tamara Fleming, EdD, Director, Fellows Program, Longwood Gardens

Know your leadership style and how it may impact your team. By understanding your core leadership characteristics, you can better understand your leadership style—your method of providing direction, implementing plans, and motivating people.

“Personal characteristics have a significant impact on leadership style, and one’s leadership style determines to a great degree one’s response to every situation.”

(David R. Kolzow 2014)

Approach

Assessments With a Leadership Lens

Recognize your own leadership style and how it may differ from that of your predecessor. **Understanding how different styles impact your organization** can offer insight into the culture, staff, or board.

Cultivate relationships; they are the key to success—yours and others'. The better relationships we have at work, the more productive we are likely to be.

Relationships can be built when you:

- Give people your time
- Ask open-ended questions
- Actively listen
- Stay positive
- Appreciate others

Find support from people in your network and learn from the experiences of others. Trusted peers from other organizations can help; share your stories, ask questions, and learn from each other.

“Be self-aware and know where you need support.”

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

Organizational Culture

Examine the combination of visible physical features, values and beliefs, basic underlying assumptions, unwritten rules and standards that contribute to the unique environment of an organization.

Organizational Culture

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.

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

Rick King, Chairman, Kittleman & Associates, LLC

“Culture is reflected in an organization's language, its rituals, norms and values.”

Michael Marquardt, EdD, Professor Emeritus, George Washington University

Edgar Schein, PhD, Professor Emeritus of MIT Sloan School of Management and recognized authority on organizational culture and leadership, uses a visual metaphor for culture that will appeal to public garden leaders:

“I like to think of culture to be like the lily pond. On the surface, you've got leaves and flowers and things that are very visible. That's the ‘how we do things around here,’ but the explanation of why we do things in that way forces you to look at the root system, what's feeding it and the history of the pond, who planted what. If you don't dig down into the reasons for why we do things this way, you've only looked at the culture at a very superficial level and you haven't really understood it.”

(Edgar Schein, quoted in Kuppler 2015)

Why should you assess it?

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.

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

Rick King, Chairman, Kittleman & Associates, LLC

Organizational Culture

“It is certainly worth it for leadership to make the effort to understand the existing culture. The culture defines the kind of leadership that is acceptable for the organization.”

(David R. Kolzow 2014)

“When you change the culture you change everything, and as leaders we have the capacity to ask what kind of culture do we want to create? Assess where the organization is, find where the gaps are and take steps to get to where you want to be.”

Michael Marquardt, EdD, Professor Emeritus, George Washington University

Why is it challenging to assess?

Organizational culture is challenging to assess because it is difficult to define and it takes time.

“It’s hard to really penetrate an organization’s actual culture in a short period. It is possible to gain a general impression of collaboration and communication, but culture is a complex matter and what people might say to the boss is not necessarily what they really believe.”

Simon Milne, MBE FRGS, Regius Keeper, Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh †

What aspects of culture do you assess and how?

Together with leaders’ contributions to this resource, what to assess is based on Edgar Schein’s three-level model of Cultural Analysis, outlined below:

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

“You can get insights by looking at the founding principles, and the organization’s aspirations.”

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

Organizational Culture

Research organizational statements and documents

These documents may include:

- Mission, vision, and values statements
- Strategic plan
- Master plan
- Staff handbook
- Business principles
- Annual reports
- Organizational chart
- Staff and event calendars
- Website

“Look at documents such as strategic plans, mission, vision, and values statements. With these, you learn a lot about the organization . . . how detailed and well-fleshed out they are, how actively used and well-matched they are with reality.”

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

Observe, ask questions, and listen

Leaders recommend meeting with everyone, engaging in conversation, and taking time to process and reflect before taking action.

“Observation is critical in the beginning. Watch and observe first.”

Tara Duckworth, Director, Airlie Gardens †

“Interview or survey staff and guests to understand their perception of the culture. It shows you what they value about the organization, and where they want the culture to be.”

Tom Underwood, Executive Director, Friends of Birmingham Botanical Gardens

Organizational Culture

Questions you can ask individuals to understand the organizational culture:

- How are decisions made in the organization?
- How would you describe the level of transparency?
- Has the mission ever been revisited?
- Tell me 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?

Resources

Recommended resources to gain a deeper understanding of organizational culture and aid leadership transitions.

1. Leading Culture Change in Global Organizations: Aligning Culture and Strategy (Denison 2012)
2. Organizational Culture and Leadership (Schein 2017)
3. The First 90 Days: Proven Strategies for Getting up to Speed Faster and Smarter (Watkins 2013)

Individual Staff

Learn about professional skills, competencies, and personal characteristics as they pertain to the organization's mission.

Individual Staff Assessment

Staff are one of the most important resources in an organization, and a leader's approach to meeting them sets the tone for future dialogue.

The advice of public garden leaders is to conduct an assessment that is transparent, to encourage staff to share their thoughts and ideas. Be straightforward, say what you are doing and why, and let staff know no topic is off-limits. Transmit a message of embracing all contributing opinions.

“Plan before you start and take the time to learn. Through assessment you will have a greater insight into your staff and the organization.”

Bryan Garey, Vice President for Human Resources, Virginia Tech

Why assess staff?

Assessment provides an informed impression of staff to support a strategic approach in planning for the future of the organization. In order to know who they are working with and whether the organization has the right people in place, leaders should assess:

How individual staff are currently contributing to mission accomplishment

How those same staff could function to their highest potential given the requisite resources

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

Michael Marquardt, EdD, Professor Emeritus, George Washington University

Individual Staff Assessment

Key goals

Reveal where urgent issues and gaps in delivering the mission exist, allowing for prioritization of time, adjustment of resource and staff allocation, and ultimately, a review of the mission itself.

“If we say we are delivering something, we need the staff to do that.”

Tom Underwood, Executive Director, Friends of Birmingham Botanical Gardens

Identify strengths of staff and areas for improvement, to focus professional development or job description updates.

“Harness their strengths!”

Rick Lewandowski, Director, Shangri La Botanical Gardens & Nature Center

Recognize sources of institutional knowledge, to allow for significant ongoing learning about the organization’s history, which informs strategic plan development.

“When you start as a leader you don’t have the depth of knowledge of the organization, so you need to draw on the staff who have. An able leader assesses quickly who to listen to.”

Simon Milne, MBE FRGS, Regius Keeper, Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh

Gauge the morale and well-being of staff, providing opportunities to acknowledge challenges and implement support systems.

“To achieve top performance in an organization, employees must not be managed like cogs in a wheel, but rather directed as musicians in a symphony.”

Neil Gerlowski, Executive Director, Vallarta Botanical Garden

Develop trust through open and honest conversations, and promote the building of strong relationships between staff and their leaders.

“Lay the ground rules for honest dialogue from the start.”

Sarah Cathcart, Vice President, Education, Longwood Gardens

Identify influencers, potential leaders, and their capabilities, to reveal opportunities to encourage and mentor talent and to implement effective succession planning.

“Getting to know your team allows you to prioritize your time and effect the right change accordingly.”

Ed Moydell, Executive Director, Bloedel Reserve

Individual Staff Assessment

Why is it a challenge?

It takes considerable time and effort to understand people, to talk with staff, and to progress through the list of people to meet.

“Take time getting to know your work colleagues.”

Shannon Still, PhD, Director of Plant Conservation & Curator, UC Davis Arboretum and Public Garden

“Be aware that as you are talking to individuals, they are reflecting on how they fit into the organization under your leadership.”

Bryan Garey, Vice President for Human Resources, Virginia Tech

While assessing professional skills and competencies may be relatively straightforward, assessing personal characteristics can be more subtle and challenging.

“Why is it so hard? It is about their personal experience or about the situation at hand.”

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

What is being assessed?

New leaders should assess staff attributes that fall broadly into three categories: professional skills, competencies, and personal characteristics. The assessment process of research, observation, and asking questions will generate a vast amount of data, which can first inform interim impressions and can then be referred to, and followed up, in the weeks and months ahead.

“Figure out what competencies you need and then determine if you have them. Job requirements may require varying degrees of each, and time will be your reaffirming point. The goal is to be able to discern all of the information and make educated decisions for the organization.”

Bryan Garey, Vice President for Human Resources, Virginia Tech

“I want to understand the successes and challenges from the staff perspective, to help focus my efforts.”

Saharah Moon Chapotin, PhD, Executive Director, United States Botanic Garden

Individual Staff Assessment

Assessment Attributes

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 _____

“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

Individual Staff Assessment

How to assess individual staff?

Public garden leaders describe two staff assessment strategies. One strategy is to use standardized self-assessments, some of which are freely available. The other strategy is more of a dynamic process that the leader initiates when starting a new position. Both are valid and can complement one another. The new senior-level leader can choose which to implement and when.

“Establish a pattern or process and stick with it!”

Clayton Bass, President & CEO, Santa Fe Botanical Garden

Standardized staff self-assessments

Standardized self-assessments are uniform, generate a lot of data, and are generally quick to implement.

“Self-assessments can help staff more quickly identify areas in which your organization can improve its effectiveness to serve its mission. While individual staff may feel uncomfortable with self-assessments, reinforcing how the results are directly tied to advancing the mission may help them become more comfortable with participation.”

(National Council of Nonprofits n.d.[b])

The sooner staff become confident in the use of self-assessment testing, the sooner they and the organization can benefit from the findings.

“The StrengthsFinder assessment created a common language for where people are coming from and how things are perceived, and how to productively work together in spite of differences.”

Ed Moydell, Executive Director, Bloedel Reserve

“StrengthsFinder puts everyone in their starring role which enables fitting staff to the right position so they can work at their best.”

Shannon Still, PhD, Director of Plant Conservation & Curator, UC Davis Arboretum and Public Garden

Individual Staff Assessment

Read documents that relate to a role and an individual's performance

“With appraisals you have context for their history, their challenges, successes; who they are and what they are hoping for in working with you as a new leader.”

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

“If they are in charge of a budget have them walk you through how they prepare that budget. While you may not know everything about what their responsibility involves, you can use your senses to see what their past work is.”

Bryan Garey, Vice President for Human Resources, Virginia Tech

Use the organizational chart to plan one-to-ones, follow hierarchy, plan vertically and horizontally

“Identify key individuals for ‘priority engagement’ in the first instance, and address the remaining staff collectively and in person. Achieve wide interaction in the first six months by devoting time and effort to the task. Be a ‘visible leader’ from day one.”

Simon Milne, MBE FRGS, Regius Keeper, Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh †

For the CEO, this is typically a vertical structure flowing down through direct reports to team members. For senior-level leaders, it is useful to explore horizontally through the organizational chart to meet with peers throughout the institution.

“It made me aware of them and what they did and vice versa and this was very useful.”

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

“Look at key relationships with people outside of the department and develop those.”

Sarah Cathcart, Vice President, Education, Longwood Gardens

The board members may assist in your assessment, specifically of leadership staff.

“I found the board had a pulse of what is going on in the organization. They helped me prioritize.”

Tom Underwood, Executive Director, Friends of Birmingham Botanical Gardens

Individual Staff Assessment

Consider the formality of the meeting's setting

“I like to meet everyone one-to-one but not always in a formal setting – it’s not like we sit in my office and talk for an hour.”

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

“Be willing to jump right in with employees at all levels and work alongside them when you can. While this might make you a bit vulnerable, it can demonstrate true care and provide you with insights from their perspectives enhanced by your shared experiences.”

Neil Gerlowski, Executive Director, Vallarta Botanical Garden

Consider where individuals will most likely speak openly: in their office, chatting over a coffee, while going about their daily routine.

What questions to ask?

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.

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

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

“Understand the way the staff view the organization.”

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

“You can afford to be a bit provocative; ask a radical question to get a sense of what staff think about change, for example ‘What would you think if we did ... [insert something mildly controversial].’”

Sir Peter Crane, President, Oak Spring Garden Foundation

Individual Staff Assessment

Questions to ask individuals about themselves

When asking questions, leaders have the opportunity to learn far more than the answers staff provide. Keep alert to various forms of communication: direct or indirect answers, intonation, and body language.

Sample questions:

- What drew you to the organization?
- 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?

Questions to ask an individual about the organization

“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

Sample questions:

- 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?

Resources

Standardized staff self-assessment resources can be used either stand-alone, or to complement an overall assessment of individual staff.

1. 9-Box Talent Model

A widely used performance and potential matrix that can be a helpful tool for succession planning and development. (Predictive Success n.d.)

2. CliftonStrengths Assessment (formerly StrengthsFinder)

An hour-long online assessment measuring natural patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving. Discover what staff naturally do best and learn how to develop their greatest talents. (Gallup Strengths Center n.d.)

3. VIA Character Strengths

The VIA Survey of Character Strengths is a simple self-assessment that takes less than fifteen minutes and provides a wealth of information to help candidates understand their core characteristics. Most personality tests focus on negative and neutral traits, but the VIA Survey focuses on their best qualities. (VIA Institute on Character n.d.)

The Board

Determine the governing body's provision of oversight, composition, expectations, level of engagement, culture, committees, and overall effectiveness.

The Board

What is a board and what does it do?

A board of directors is a governing body for an organization with legal responsibilities of care, loyalty, and obedience. A board's primary role includes setting direction for, and providing oversight of, the organization.

A number of different types of organizations operate with a board of directors. This assessment limits the definition of 'the board' to boards of nonprofit organizations.

According to BoardSource's publication *The Handbook of Nonprofit Governance*, "the board is a group of volunteers that is legally responsible for making sure the organization remains true to its mission, safeguards its assets, and operates in the public interest" (BoardSource 2010, 7–8).

In the United States, there are three legal standards to which a board must adhere: the duty of care, the duty of loyalty, and the duty of obedience. While operating within these standards, a board has three primary roles: setting organizational direction, ensuring necessary resources, and providing oversight (BoardSource 2010, 31).

Further explanation of these three legal standards and a board's primary roles can be found in Table A on the next page.

The Board

Table A

Legal Standards and Primary Roles

*Abbreviated from
The Handbook of
Nonprofit Governance
(BoardSource 2010,
19, 31–45)*

Legal Standards

1. Duty of care

A standard of care to ensure that decisions are made, with reasonable investigation of options, in the organization's best interest

2. Duty of loyalty

A duty to act in good faith for the best interest of the organization, rather than for self-interest or for the interest of another person or organization

3. Duty of obedience

A standard to ensure that the organization and its board comply with laws, adhere to the organization's bylaws, and act in faithfulness to the mission

Primary Roles

1. Set organizational direction

- a. Determine mission, vision, and values
- b. Engage in strategic thinking
- c. Ensure effective planning

2. Ensure the necessary resources, both financial and human

- a. Build a competent board
- b. Select the chief executive
- c. Ensure adequate financial resources
- d. Enhance the organization's public standing

3. Provide oversight of the chief executive officer (CEO), assets, and programs

- a. Support and evaluate the CEO
- b. Protect assets and provide financial oversight
- c. Monitor and strengthen programs and services
- d. Ensure legal and ethical integrity

The Board

Why should you assess the board?

Assessment of the board is **vital and relevant** for a chief executive officer (CEO).

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

“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

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 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 †

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's like a professional marriage, it's a vital relationship. It can take a few board and one-to-one meetings to assess and build the necessary trust that leads to understanding, collaboration, and excellence.”

Simon Milne, MBE FRGS, Regius Keeper, Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh

Leaders noted that another important goal is to understand how willing a board is to allow the CEO to lead change. Will there be the freedom to take certain measured risks? A prime time to assess and understand expectations, accountabilities, and respective roles of the CEO and the board is during a CEO transition (Au 2012).

The Board

Why is it a challenge to assess the board?

Assessment of the board is twofold: assessing the board members and assessing the board culture. This is complex and time intensive.

As already mentioned, the relationship between the CEO and the board is crucial to the success of the organization. The assessment of a board and its individuals takes time because it depends upon first building some level of relationship.

“It takes some time to understand how the board works, to research past papers, and then meet them and learn about their background, their interests, their skill set.”

Kevin Reid, Director of Horticulture, Learning and Estates, Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh

Early assessment is made **more difficult with a large board**.

“Our board is large with more than sixty-five members; there was no way to assess it as part of the interview process. The best you can do with a very large board is attempt to read the board through the search committee.”

Jean M. Franczyk, President & CEO, Chicago Botanic Garden †

Other challenges include **long-established boards**, where significant history among the members may be at play. **Boards in transition**—from an operational board to a governing board; or between key officers, such as board chair, vice-chair, secretary, or treasurer—can also present a challenge.

“A board transitioning from a hands-on operating board to a governance board has to learn what that means, and they may have a bit of an identity issue.”

Michael Monterusso, Executive Director, Alaska Botanical Garden

The Board

What should you assess?

Before embarking on an assessment, consider your objectives. According to the leaders interviewed, an assessment of the board seeks to understand:

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; does it carry out self-assessments?

How should you assess?

The assessment of the board is twofold: assess the individual board members and assess the culture of the board. These assessments can be informal or formal. Leaders consider an informal approach, using **observation**, background **research**, and **conversation**, to be most appropriate for initial assessment. A formal approach, such as an assessment carried out by a third-party consultant or a self-assessment, may be more suitable at a later date.

Individual board members

The key theme illuminated by interviews and survey responses was to get to know each member on an individual basis.

“The most important thing I recommend to anybody trying to understand the board, is to remember it’s a collection of individuals. Take time to meet each of them separately and ask open-ended questions to understand what’s important to them.”

Susan Detwiler, President, The Detwiler Group

This advice from Detwiler was echoed by many leaders. During meetings and interactions with individual board members, CEOs seek to:

Identify the individual’s strengths and skills

“Part of board assessment is skill set evaluation; you can look at background, expertise, geography, and other dimensions.”

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

The Board

Understand their expectations of you as CEO

“You need to really understand their desires, their expectations.”

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

Investigate their level of engagement with the board, and with the organization

“Sometimes a board is very engaged; you can get passionate board members who just want to do your job. Learning how to engage, while moderating desire to micromanage, is an art!”

Senior-level leader of public garden

Identify which members are the early adopters of new ideas

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

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

Recognize which members have the respect of, and influence over, others on the board

“These individual conversations can offer insights into the board dynamics: how they work together, and who has influence.”

Rick King, Chairman, Kittleman & Associates, LLC

Understand how well the individual works with other board members

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

Adriana Quiñones, Executive Director, Cape Fear Botanical Garden

The Board

Questions to ask individual board members

Example questions that help to understand individual board members were suggested by the interviewees. Asking the same questions to every board member has the advantage of revealing consistency as well as divergence.

- 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?

How should you assess board culture?

Assessing the board collectively is slightly different from understanding the members as individuals. Some questions posed to the whole board are the same as those posed to individual members, but the answers might be quite different. There are several inquiries that help decode the board culture and shed light on its overall effectiveness:

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

“I see that it is important to work closely with our new board chair to ensure that the board's goals come from the standpoint of governance and that staff decision making is grounded in strategy and daily operations.”

Rodney Eason, CEO, Land & Garden Preserve

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

“Understanding the tenure cycle is important to know inherent challenges coming down the line when it comes to continuity and gaps.”

Ed Moydell, Executive Director, Bloedel Reserve

The Board

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

“It is good practice to attend as many committee meetings as possible; the behavior of each committee will be evident and unique.”

Rick King, Chairman, Kittleman & Associates, LLC

What is the balance and diversity of the board?

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

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

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. See Table B for an example.

“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

Has the board ever done a written self-assessment? If so, these reports can shed light on how the board sees itself. If not, this by itself can be a good indicator of board culture. A 2007 survey by BoardSource found that only about half of all boards surveyed had carried out a self-assessment (BoardSource 2007).

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?

The Board

Table B

Exceptional Board Practices

*Abbreviated from
The Handbook of
Nonprofit Governance
(BoardSource 2010, 23–25)*

Exceptional Board Practices	
Constructive partnership with CEO	Exceptional boards recognize that the effectiveness of the board and the CEO are interdependent
Mission-driven	Exceptional boards shape and uphold the mission, articulate a compelling vision, and align decisions with core values
Strategic thinking	Exceptional boards continually engage in strategic thinking to hone the organization's direction
Culture of inquiry	Exceptional boards seek more information, question assumptions, challenge conclusions, and advocate for analysis
Independent mindedness	Exceptional boards apply rigorous conflict-of-interest procedures, and board members put the interests of the organization above all else when making decisions
Ethos of transparency	Exceptional boards ensure that donors, stakeholders, and interested members of the public have access to appropriate and accurate information
Compliance with integrity	Exceptional boards establish appropriate mechanisms, such as audits, for active oversight to ensure accountability and adequate controls
Sustaining resources	Exceptional boards link bold visions and ambitious plans to financial support, expertise, and networks of influence
Results oriented	Exceptional boards measure the organization's progress toward mission goals and evaluate the performance of major programs and services
Intentional board practices	Exceptional boards purposefully structure themselves to fulfill essential governance duties and to support organizational priorities
Continuous learning	Exceptional boards self-evaluate performance and embed learning opportunities into routine governance work
Revitalization	Exceptional boards energize themselves through planned turnover, thoughtful recruitment, and inclusiveness

Resources

Selected resources for guidance on working with boards in the nonprofit sector.

1. The Handbook of Nonprofit Governance (Boardsource 2010)
2. Foundation Board Leadership: A Closer Look at Foundation Board Responses to Leading with Intent 2017 (Boardsource 2018)
3. National Council of Nonprofits (National Council of Nonprofits n.d.[a])
an online resource for:
 - advocacy
 - boards & governance
 - employment
 - ethics & accountability
 - financial management
 - fundraising
 - leadership

Maintaining Momentum With a Leadership Lens

Sharing findings, identifying early wins, and reflecting regularly help to continue the momentum of the assessment process.

Share your findings and be transparent with results. Public garden leaders recommend sharing themes, celebrating successes, and acknowledging challenges from the assessment process. Sharing this information demonstrates transparency and helps staff understand that everyone went through this process together, and for a reason.

“Be thoughtful. Make sure the feedback loop happens with ALL the people. Everyone deserves a summary of your findings and beliefs, before moving forward.”

Matthew Stephens, Garden Director, San Francisco Botanical Garden and Conservatory of Flowers

“It helped create buy-in from staff to say: ‘through all these conversations, I heard this theme, and we are changing a garden policy because of your feedback.’”

Grace Elton, CEO, Tower Hill Botanic Garden

Use the assessment to **identify early wins**. Celebrating quick wins allows progress to be realized. As an organization adjusts to a new leader, achieving small goals makes the bigger picture possible.

“Celebrate what is going well and get some quick wins right at the start.”

Sarah Cathcart, Vice President, Education, Longwood Gardens

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

“Take the time to review your initial impressions because there are different experiences, ideas, perceptions, points of view, and motives at play.”

Tim Johnson, PhD, Director, The Botanic Garden of Smith College

Assessment is an **ongoing process** that continually builds upon previous iterations.

“To not to continue to assess, we would become stagnant and just be going through the motions. We always want to be moving forward.”

Kristin Thoroman, Director of Education and Exhibitions, Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden

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President
The Detwiler Group

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Executive Director
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President & CEO
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Executive Director
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Professor Emeritus
George Washington University

Sarah Cathcart
Vice President, Education
Longwood Gardens

Tara Duckworth
Executive Director
Airlie Gardens

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Executive Director
Lan Su Chinese Garden

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President & CEO
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Executive Director
United States Botanic Garden

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CEO
Land & Garden Preserve

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Director
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CEO
Tower Hill Botanic Garden

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Tamara Fleming, EdD
Director, Fellows Program
Longwood Gardens

Ethan Kauffman
Director
Stoneleigh

John Morse
Director of Horticulture
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Executive Director
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Director of Education and
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Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden

Kara Newport
Executive Director
Filoli Center

Kevin Reid
Director of Horticulture,
Learning and Estates
Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh

Matthew Stephens
Garden Director
San Francisco Botanical Garden
and Conservatory of Flowers

Tom Underwood
Executive Director
Friends of Birmingham Botanical
Gardens

Ari Novy, PhD
President & CEO
San Diego Botanic Garden

John Rumm, PhD
Executive Director
Nemours Estate

Shannon Still, PhD
Director of Plant
Conservation & Curator
UCDavis Arboretum and Public
Garden

Rip Weaver
Executive Director
Aldridge Gardens

Jennifer Pollard, CFRE
Executive Director
Lockerly Arboretum Foundation

Tabitha Schmidt
President & CEO
Powell Gardens

Ben Streissguth
Executive Director
Streissguth Gardens

Adriana Quiñones
Executive Director
Cape Fear Botanical Garden

Adam Schwerner
Director of Horticulture and
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Disneyland Resort

Sheryl Swed
Executive Director
Delaware Botanic Gardens

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End Notes

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 resource was gathered through interviews of global public garden leaders and subject experts over a 7-month period in 2018–2019.

The Fellows 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 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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