

## Executive Summary

In March 2026, BoardSource facilitated six listening sessions with participants in the Newark Nonprofit Leadership Resilience Fund (NNLRF) convening (18 board members and 28 executive directors/CEOs). We asked a series of questions to explore a central question: *what does “good governance” look like, and what gets in the way of practicing it consistently?* A clear throughline emerged: organizations generally have the right governance intentions and structures, but many struggle to execute and sustain strong governance practices between meetings and over time.

**What leaders agree on:** Board members and executive directors share a strong, aligned definition of governance—strategic leadership, an effective board–CEO partnership, and stewardship of mission and community impact.

**Where it breaks down in practice:** Participants described recurring barriers that weaken follow-through and shared ownership.

- Momentum is strong in board meetings, but it fades between meetings.
- A small group carries most of the work because engagement varies across members.
- Information and expectations are not consistently shared across the full board and CEO.
- Committees and roles exist, but they are not reliably activated to drive action.

**A key gap is “day-to-day governance,” not “governance on paper.”** Board members often describe governance in terms of the intended structure (committees, roles, meeting decisions). Executive directors more often describe what it takes to make that structure work—keeping people engaged, aligning in real time, and ensuring decisions turn into action. The result is not a lack of governance, but governance that is harder to sustain consistently.

**What this suggests:** Many organizations don’t need a new definition of governance; they need support to **practice** governance consistently. A cohort model can help build durable habits and shared accountability—so governance strength shows up not only in meetings, but in follow-through, shared ownership, and continuity between meetings.

- Keep strategy and priorities aligned between meetings (not just at the board table).
- Turn board decisions into clear next steps, owners, and timelines.
- Spread responsibility across the board so leadership is not concentrated in a few people.
- Improve information flow and shared understanding across the full board and CEO.
- Strengthen the board–CEO partnership as an ongoing working relationship.

NNLRF is designed to build these capabilities through structured learning, peer support, and tailored technical assistance for a cohort of nonprofits. The aim is to strengthen governance practices that persist beyond a single training or board retreat—supporting clearer decision-making, accountability, and long-term organizational performance across multiple organizations.

*Next: a brief note on how we gathered input, followed by the key patterns leaders described.*

## Methodology

BoardSource convened six small-group listening sessions with NNLRF participants to understand how board governance is working in practice and what support would make it stronger.

- Two sessions with board members (18 participants)
- Four sessions with executive directors/CEOs (28 participants)

In each session, participants discussed what strong governance looks like, where their organizations are doing well, and where they face barriers (including roles, committees, board–CEO partnership, engagement, communication, and follow-through).

- What “good governance” looks like
- Where their boards align with that definition
- Where governance falls short
- How structures (e.g., committees, roles) function
- Board–CEO relationships, engagement, and communication

We reviewed notes across sessions and summarized recurring themes that showed up consistently across organizations and roles. **NOTE: When this report refers to the “number of mentions,” it means how often a theme came up in conversation—not how many individuals said it.**

Because this is qualitative input, the findings are not meant to be statistically representative. They are meant to surface shared, real-world governance dynamics that repeat across many organizations—and that a cohort investment can realistically address.

## Governance in Practice: Key Patterns

### **Governance Is Defined in Consistent and Shared Terms Across Roles**

Across both board members and executive directors, definitions of good governance were remarkably consistent. Participants most often described governance as:

- **Setting direction (50+ mentions, board members):** clarifying priorities and making decisions that keep the organization focused long term
- **A strong board–CEO partnership (10–15 board members; 20 CEOs):** a working relationship that advances strategy and supports oversight
- **Stewarding mission and impact (10–15 both groups):** ensuring decisions stay grounded in purpose and community outcomes

As one board member put it, *“Everything should come back to the mission.”* CEOs echoed the same idea, emphasizing that governance works best as a true partnership.

**Implication:** The issue is not confusion about what governance should be. The opportunity is helping organizations build the routines and shared accountability to carry that definition into consistent practice.

### **Governance Holds in Moments—but Is Not Consistently Sustained**

Participants repeatedly described governance as strongest in formal moments—especially board meetings—and less reliable in what happens after. One board member noted, *“When we’re in meetings, the conversations are strong.”*

CEOs more often emphasized the challenge of sustaining momentum once the meeting ends. As one CEO reflected, *“You leave a meeting with good ideas, but then you have to go back and keep it moving.”*

Across roles, leaders described common post-meeting challenges: unclear owners, uneven engagement, and decisions that need to be revisited because follow-through stalls. Both board members and CEOs raised this theme frequently (60+ mentions overall).

**Implication:** Improving governance isn’t only about better meetings. It’s about building the between-meeting practices—communication, accountability, and decision tracking—that make governance durable.

### **Board Members Describe Governance by Its Structure—Executive Directors by How It Functions**

When leaders shifted from defining governance to describing day-to-day reality, a consistent difference emerged: **board members tended to talk about governance as a structure, while CEOs talked about governance as a set of working behaviors.**

Board members most often highlighted:

- **Strategy and direction (50+ mentions):** long-term priorities and decision-making
- **Committees and processes (40+ mentions):** how board work is organized and distributed
- **Clear roles (20–25 mentions):** expectations for board and executive leadership

As one board member said, *“The structure is there—we have the committees, we have the processes.”*

CEOs, in contrast, emphasized what it takes to make governance work between meetings:

- **Consistent engagement (25–30 mentions):** level and consistency of board member participation and involvement, and participation that doesn’t depend on a few people
- **Clear communication (15–20 mentions):** shared information and expectations across the board and CEO
- **Follow-through (10–15 mentions):** decisions that are activated, not just discussed

As one CEO summarized, *“It’s not that people don’t care—it’s that it doesn’t always move forward.”*

**Implication:** Many organizations already have the “right” structures. The highest-leverage support helps boards and CEOs translate structure into reliable behaviors—engagement, communication, and follow-through.

### **Governance Becomes Concentrated Among a Few Members**

Leaders noted that while governance is intended to be shared, in practice it is often carried by a small group. Board members acknowledged differences in participation (**15–20 mentions**) and uneven familiarity with the organization’s work (**10–15 mentions**). As one board member noted, *“Not everyone is equally involved in the work.”*

CEOs described the consequences more directly: when engagement is inconsistent, continuity and follow-through suffer—and responsibility shifts to a smaller group (**25–30 mentions**). They also pointed to information gaps that make shared decision-making harder (**15–20 mentions**). *“Not everyone has the same information at the same time.”* As one CEO put it, *“You’re relying on a few people to keep things moving.”*

**Implication:** Strong governance requires shared ownership. Approaches that build participation norms and consistent information-sharing can reduce over-reliance on a few individuals and improve board effectiveness.

### **Implications for Cohort-Based Governance Support (NNLRF)**

Taken together, these sessions suggest the core challenge is not whether nonprofits value governance—it’s whether governance is **durable**. Many boards have the right intentions and the basic structures. What’s missing are the practical routines that keep alignment, shared ownership, and follow-through strong over time.

This matters because when governance depends on individual heroics—often the CEO’s—rather than shared practice, organizations lose continuity and speed. Efforts that only reinforce policies, bylaws, or one-time trainings may not change what happens between meetings. The most effective support focuses on helping boards and CEOs build repeatable ways of working: clear decision ownership, consistent communication, and accountability that doesn’t fade after a meeting ends.

NNLRF is positioned to deliver this kind of support at scale by investing in a cohort of organizations and pairing learning with practical implementation support (training, peer learning, consulting, and board development).

**What a cohort approach can strengthen through NNLRF:** a shift from “governance as a plan” to “governance as a practice,” including:

- More board members actively owning work—not just a dependable few.
- Better continuity between meetings through clear decision tracking, communication, and accountability.
- Stronger follow-through so board decisions translate into action and results.

**Success looks like** boards and CEOs who share ownership, stay aligned between meetings, and consistently execute on the decisions they make. The opportunity is not to rebuild governance foundations; it is to help governance **hold**—month to month, across members, and through leadership transitions.

# STRONG FOUNDATIONS. INCONSISTENT PRACTICE. BIG IMPACT.

## Why The Newark Nonprofit Leadership Resilience Fund (NNLRF) is Needed Now.

What BoardSource heard from board members and CEOs across NNLRF listening sessions

BASED ON DATA FROM:  
NNLRF LISTENING SESSIONS

 Board Members  CEOs



### THE CHALLENGE

Governance is well understood but not consistently sustained in practice.



#### GOVERNANCE HAPPENS IN PEAKS

Energy and engagement are strong in the moment...

“Everything should come back to the mission.”

– Board Member



#### BUT MOMENTUM DOESN'T CARRY

Follow-through slows, priorities shift, decisions stall.

“Sometimes we're leading the board...”

– CEO



#### RESPONSIBILITY LANDS ON A FEW

Too much of the work falls to the CEO or a small group.

“And I find that, particularly as ED, that sometimes we're leading the board...”

– CEO



#### COMMUNICATION AND ALIGNMENT FADE

Between meetings, information doesn't flow and alignment weakens.

“Board members don't always know what the organization actually does.”

– Board Member



#### THE CYCLE REPEATS

Boards regroup, reset, and start again.

“You have to literally fight through that blame game with your board.”

– CEO



### THE IMPACT



Decisions take longer. Opportunities are missed.



CEO capacity is stretched. Leadership burnout increases.



Board potential is underutilized.



Mission progress slows—even when everyone cares deeply.

### WHAT WE HEAR: INTERMITTENT GOVERNANCE

Episodic. Reactive. Dependent on a few.



### WHAT'S NEEDED: SUSTAINED GOVERNANCE

Continuous. Shared. Built into how the board works.



#### WORKS IN REAL TIME

Supports boards and CEOs in the flow of their actual governance work—when decisions are being made and challenges arise.



#### BUILDS CONTINUITY

Helps maintain alignment, carry decisions forward, and keep momentum between meetings.



#### DISTRIBUTES RESPONSIBILITY

Strengthens shared ownership across the board and CEO—so the work doesn't rely on a few or fall on one person.



#### STRENGTHENS THE PARTNERSHIP

Deepens the board–CEO partnership as an ongoing working dynamic, not just a periodic interaction.



#### DELIVERS STRONGER IMPACT

Boards govern more effectively. CEOs lead with greater capacity. Organizations advance their mission with greater resilience.



### THE OPPORTUNITY

Governance does not need to be redefined. It needs to be sustained—consistently, collectively, and over time.  
**The Newark Nonprofit Leadership Resilience Fund (NNLRF) makes that possible.**

**STRONGER GOVERNANCE.  
STRONGER MISSIONS.  
STRONGER NEWARK.**



Quotes are verbatim from BoardSource-facilitated NNLRF listening sessions with board members and CEOs.