LEADERSHIP INSPIRED

Social Impactors for India

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COVER STORY

Evolving Role of Boards in the Social Sector

A Governance Blueprint

by India Leaders for Social Sector, Antara Advisory

WHAT'S INSIDE

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Foreword

Anu Prasad
Founder-CEO, ILSS

As someone deeply committed to strengthening India's social impact sector, I have come to appreciate that the strength of an organisation does not rest solely on its leadership team. It is equally shaped by the commitment and engagement of its Board.

I experienced this firsthand during our ILSS strategy exercise, version 2.0. At a pivotal moment of growth and reflection, my Board stood alongside me as true thought partners. They challenged assumptions, helped refine our priorities, and ensured our vision remained bold yet grounded in impact. Their diverse perspectives, constructive pushback, and unwavering support were instrumental in sharpening our focus and charting a clear direction for the future.

The recent recognition of Educate Girls with the Ramon Magsaysay Award illustrates this truth. Their Board did much more than fulfil statutory responsibilities; they catalysed innovation, held the organisation accountable to its mission, and supported scale with both rigour and responsibility.

The relevance of Boards in the social sector cannot be overstated. Founders often speak of the loneliness of leadership, the weight of responsibility, constant decision-making, and the challenge of balancing short-term crises with long-term vision. In such moments, an invested advisory Board becomes more than a governance body; it is a sounding board, a source of perspective, and an anchor of stability. Boards can potentially bring together expertise ranging from corporate leaders and philanthropists to educationists and grassroots practitioners, offering diverse perspectives and helping organisations navigate risk and complexity more effectively. When they engage deeply through field visits, project-based involvement, or mentoring senior teams, Boards can shift from being formal structures to becoming true partners in impact.

In today's context, where the social sector faces increasing complexity and limited resources, Boards are not a luxury. They are critical enablers of resilience, strategy, and long-term purpose. As this issue of Leadership Inspired explores, there is a growing need to reimagine Boards: to make them more diverse, more engaged, and more visionary.

If we are to build organisations that not only survive but truly thrive, we must invest in building Boards that serve as anchors of wisdom, stewards of accountability, and champions of transformative change. LI

The Editorial

Samina Alam,
Lead - Centre of Excellence for Board and Governance, ILSS

‘Strengthening the board is like strengthening the nerve centre of the organisation. A strong board can go a long way in steering the trajectory of an organisation.’

At ILSS, we believe true transformation starts at the top with vision, alignment, and courageous leadership. At the heart of this lies the board: often quiet but instrumental in shaping the future of every mission-driven organisation.

Nonprofits thrive when decisions are intentional, purpose-driven, and future-focused, when leaders feel both supported and challenged by a board that serves as a critical conscience and passionate ally. This edition of Leadership Inspired spotlights how the ILSS Centre for Board and Governance is helping in shifting how boards are seen from static oversight bodies to dynamic partners in growth.

The cover story, Evolving Role of Boards in the Social Sector, previews findings from a landscape study on advisory boards in India. Nonprofits are increasingly creating these to complement legal boards, adding depth in strategy, branding, systems thinking, and change management.

ILSS Insights offers the ILSS experience and perspective on the critical role of effective board governance, highlighting how a dynamic partnership between organisational leaders and a well-aligned board can drive success. In Alumni Spotlight, we showcase how nonprofit leaders and corporate professionals of two social purpose organisations, Adhyayan and Foster & Forge, are reimagining board structures with greater clarity, cohesion, and effectiveness. ILSS Conversation brings insights from a recent webinar with Dr Dhir Jhingran on his leadership journey in the administrative service and subsequent transition to social entrepreneurship, as he shared important lessons on meaningful board engagement. ILSS Tips emphasises the importance of strong financial governance in nonprofits and offers suggestions to address the challenges faced in this regard.

In the Guest Column, Tara Vachani offers honest insights from her journey with the Teach for India board, highlighting the value of early investment in strong governance, committed leadership, and trust-building processes, while author Ravishakar Iyer shares an anecdote from his book, Story Rules, to convey how good storytelling and transparency can help in effective communication with the board.

We hope that as you read, reflect, and engage with the diverse perspectives in this edition, you’ll find fresh inspiration for your own board journey rooted in purpose, courage, and the relentless pursuit of impact. LI

COVER STORY

Evolving Role of Boards in the Social Sector

A Governance Blueprint

Nonprofit organisations require robust and transparent governance, clear accountability, strategic foresight, and strong on-ground engagement.

Governance remains a central question for the sector. Nonprofit governance can be understood as 'the systems and processes concerned with ensuring the overall direction, control, and accountability of the organisation.'[1] Within the larger framework of board governance, strong statutory boards are an essential component to ensure that a nonprofit organisation is effective in its mission and compliant with the regulatory context that governs its work. Alongside, advisory boards have been emerging as a structure to enable organisations to meet their strategic needs.

Well-functioning boards are critical to the effective functioning of a nonprofit organisation. Effective boards improve organisational performance in many ways. In fact, the board is one of the key structures for an organisation's governance, which is a process shaped by multiple other structures – executive leadership teams, internal policies, financial management systems, risk management frameworks, and operational procedures. Together, they play a role in ensuring accountability, strategic direction, and organisational effectiveness.

The adoption of advisory boards as part of integrated governance systems is gaining traction globally, with businesses, nonprofits, and industry bodies using them to navigate complexity through strategic guidance, diverse perspectives, and agile leadership.

The adoption of advisory boards as part of integrated governance systems is gaining traction globally, with businesses, nonprofits, and industry bodies using them to navigate complexity through strategic guidance, diverse perspectives, and agile leadership. Our research suggests that similar momentum is emerging in India's nonprofit sector, where nonprofit organisations are beginning to see advisory boards as a way to strengthen governance, complement statutory boards, and access specialised expertise to address evolving challenges. Together, advisory and statutory boards create a comprehensive two-tiered model of governance that has the potential to strengthen compliance, strategy, and foresight.

Situated within the Indian nonprofit ecosystem[2], this research study explores advisory boards in India as complementary structures to statutory boards, designed to reinforce nonprofit governance and enhance organisational effectiveness. The report aims to serve as a sector-wide resource on how advisory boards can strengthen nonprofit strategy, performance and governance in India, offering insights for nonprofit leaders, board members from the corporate sector, senior civil society leaders, funders, and participants of governance capacity-building initiatives like those by ILSS. Drawing on extensive research, the report also offers practical guidance to organisations on how to build and leverage advisory boards effectively.

The case for strong nonprofit governance

Governance is also defined as 'the board's legal authority to exercise power and authority over an organisation on behalf of the community

it serves'.[3] Effective governance is widely recognised as a critical element in a nonprofit organisation's ability to achieve impact. Studies have shown that nonprofit organisations with strong governance systems are better equipped to use their resources efficiently, uphold accountability to stakeholders, and respond to changing conditions.[4] Boards shape the foundation of strong governance in an organisation. Understanding the legal, ethical, and practical foundations of strong governance is key to seeing how a two-tiered model, combining the benefits of statutory and advisory boards, strengthens nonprofits.[5]

Governing boards are mandated by law to assume fiduciary responsibility for the organisation's well-being, ensuring compliance with regulatory requirements and safeguarding against misuse of resources. Advisory boards can supplement the legal responsibilities of governing boards by providing subject matter expertise, strategic guidance, and innovation support.

Governing boards are mandated by law to assume fiduciary responsibility for the organisation's well-being, ensuring compliance with regulatory requirements and safeguarding against misuse of resources. Advisory boards can supplement the legal responsibilities of governing boards by providing subject matter expertise, strategic guidance, and innovation support.

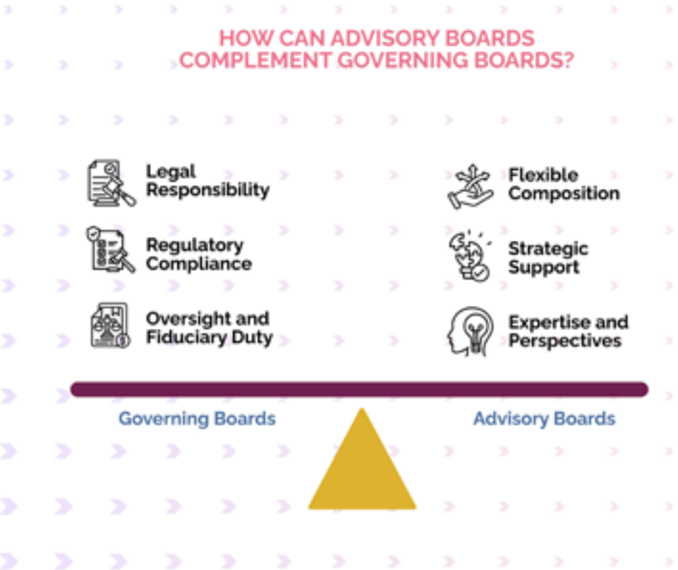
As described metaphorically by some of our interview respondents, boards act as a gyroscope[6] providing stability, a lighthouse[7] offering insight and foresight, and an ambassador[8] advancing the organisation's mission. If designed intentionally, advisory boards may complement governing boards to form a two-tiered model of governance that offers stability, foresight and ambassadorship.

Understanding governing boards and advisory boards - principles, practice, and global trends

Not-for-profit organisations in India are typically incorporated as Trusts, Societies, or Section 8 companies. Governing boards are bodies mandated by law to ensure legal and regulatory compliance and have legal discretionary power. The governing board refers to a managing committee or governing board in the case of a Society, trustees in the case of a Trust, and a Board of Directors in the case of a Section 8 company.[9]

Alongside governing boards, many organisations also establish advisory boards. Advisory boards provide guidance, inform strategy, and build connections in support of the organisation's mission.

Alongside governing boards, many organisations also establish advisory boards. Advisory boards provide guidance, inform strategy, and build connections in support of the organisation's mission. They can also serve as a training ground for future board members. Unlike a governing board/board of trustees, an advisory board has no legal oversight and fiduciary responsibilities.



Advisory boards can be more flexible in their composition and purpose than governing boards.[10]

- A purpose-driven advisory board can be 'self-defined' by organisations to focus on areas such as fundraising, partnerships, or organisational development.[11]
- Unlike governing boards, changes in advisory board composition are not subject to regulatory approval or reporting requirements with bodies such as the Office of the Charities Commissioner or Registrar of Companies.[12] This allows organisations to adapt the composition of advisory boards in response to their strategic or programmatic needs.
- Avisory boards may be constituted under different names, such as advisory councils or steering committees. Some experts are of the opinion that these names are preferred rather than 'advisory boards' to minimise conflation or confusion.[13]
- An advisory board or group may be established temporarily for a specific purpose/project[14] or as a permanent part of an organisation's broader governance system.[15]
- These allow organisations to bring committed evangelists and supporters into their fold without crowding the statutory board.[16]
- Advisory boards may offer a platform to engage with trusted stakeholders (such as former governing board members, who hold valuable institutional memory) after the expiration of their board term.[17]

The growing phenomenon of advisory boards can be explained through the lens of organisational theory.[18] A 1998 essay titled Expanding the Governance Construct: Functions and Contributions of Nonprofit Advisory Groups attributes this phenomenon to two key ideas from organisational theory: **resource dependence and structural innovation.** The essay argues that advisory boards help nonprofits build relationships with influential outsiders, giving them access to resources, legitimacy, and strategic support. At the same time, advisory boards represent a structural innovation, helping organisations adapt to complex external environments and build internal expertise.

More recently, the **Advisory Board Centre's 'State of the Market 2025-2027' report** highlights three global megatrends shaping the evolution of advisory boards across sectors. These are:

i) Aligning advisory boards with broader organisational governance,
ii) Using advisory boards and their expertise

to help organisation leaders make confident decisions.
iii) Balancing short-term actions with long-term strategy, especially in uncertain environments.[19]

Our research finds that these global, cross-sectoral trends find resonance in the Indian nonprofit sector as well.

- Nonprofit organisations are increasingly viewing advisory boards as a mechanism that can enhance governance by complementing statutory boards with technical expertise, diverse perspectives, and specialised counsel. From our research, we see that many organisations that currently do not have advisory boards are beginning to think about the strategic value this additional body can bring to their governance model.

- Our research indicates that organisations are bringing on members to their advisory boards for expertise on a variety of subjects – fundraising, strategy, evaluation, digital transformation – thus equipping organisation leaders with insights and confidence to respond effectively in complex environments.

- Finally, social purpose organisations are increasingly seeking to leverage the flexibility and adaptability of advisory boards to address questions of organisational resilience and program relevance, thereby balancing short-term responsiveness with long-term strategy. Our research suggests that advisory boards are increasingly becoming valuable 'thought partners' to organisations, supporting them not only in fundraising but also in longer-term strategic questions – such as leadership development, scale, and sustainability.

As the operating context of social purpose organisations changes rapidly, advisory boards are becoming structures for adaptive planning that enable organisations to remain agile in the face of uncertainty.

(This article is the 'Introduction' to 'The ILSS Landscape Research on Nonprofit Advisory Boards in India', developed in partnership with Antara Advisory, who provided expertise and insight on the research process and adaptation to the sector.) LI

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ILSS Insights

Listening Boards, Resilient Leaders

Rethinking Governance for Social Impact

ILSS Insights

Archana Ramachandran,
COO, ILSS

In the early years of working with over 100 social purpose organisations (SPOs), we at ILSS began noticing a pattern. Many early-stage SPO founders, especially those building organisations under five years old, expressed a shared challenge: they felt alone in navigating the long-term needs of their organisations while being immersed in the day-to-day. As a young founder of an SPO that works across multiple states in India, shared with us: 'It's hard for me to zoom out from operational and team-related priorities, to be able to create time for the long term and more fundamental questions such as impact.'

At the same time, when we examined SPOs that had sustained impact over time, a common thread emerged — a strong, committed board that supported the founder/CEO not just with governance, but also with strategic thinking, decision-making, and, often, emotional support through difficult transitions. In our conversations with organisations that not only survived but also reinvented themselves during the COVID-19 crisis, many attributed their ability to navigate those years heavily to the guidance of a board that both had their back emotionally and advised them on working with the ecosystem to move forward amidst the unique challenges that emerged with the global crisis.

A Missing Link in the Ecosystem: Board Leadership That Listens

Through our work with crossover leaders and home-grown leaders in the social sector, we saw a unique opportunity for senior corporate leaders to be part of India's social sector. These leaders brought with them a wealth of experience, having scaled organisations, built teams, and navigated complex challenges. But more importantly, they came with genuine curiosity and openness: How can we be of value in this very different ecosystem?

It was this potential that sparked the creation of The ILSS Board Leadership Program in January 2022. The program was designed to prepare corporate leaders to become advisers and board members in the social sector, those who could contribute strategically while prioritising learning about the organisation and the unique realities of the social sector.

What we consistently heard from social purpose organisation (SPO) leaders affirmed this approach:

'We don't want people who only give gyaan.' 'We need board members who visit us, understand how we work, and are willing to learn before they advise.'

This feedback helped clarify a critical distinction: while skills and experience matter, what SPOs truly need are board members who bring humility, empathy, and active listening to the table.

This feedback helped clarify a critical distinction: while skills and experience matter, what SPOs truly need are board members who bring humility, empathy, and active listening to the table. That intent to learn before advising has since become a core principle of our board leadership journey and one of

Archana Ramachandran,
COO, ILSS

the strongest indicators of long-term alignment between a board member and an SPO leader.

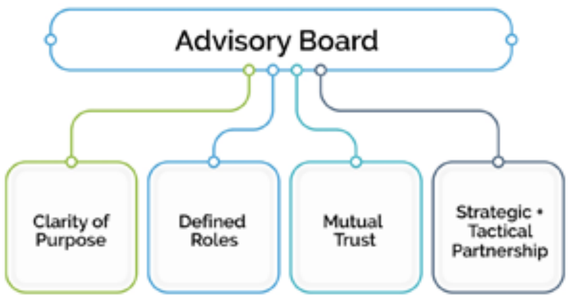
From Insight to Action: Building Programs That Serve Leaders
As these conversations deepened, we saw clearly that the gap wasn't only about the presence of boards, but also about how they functioned and whether they were designed with the founder's real needs in mind.

In 2021, the Advisory Board of Teach For India Delhi, where ILSS Founder and CEO Anu Prasad served as a member, approached us to support their alumni entrepreneurs in setting up or strengthening their boards. This led to a pilot workshop with 15 SPO leaders, where we explored the role of boards not just in governance, but as a 'holding environment' for founders: a space for reflection, perspective, and support. As the CEO of a leading education nonprofit that partners with the government on teacher training, shared at the end of the workshop: *'The most important learning is to set up the board right away, and not wait for an ideal time. To start by finding that first board member, and then work with them step by step on the journey.'*
Following the workshop, we worked more closely with a sub-group of these leaders to help them begin the process of board building or refinement. In parallel, as we began mapping graduates of The ILSS Board Leadership Program (BLP) to early-stage SPOs, we noticed a recurring theme: SPO leaders often felt unsure about how to best engage board members and were looking for tools, examples, and real-time feedback on doing this well.

These two insights — SPOs needing more than just governance advice, and board members wanting to serve meaningfully but with guidance — led us to launch The ILSS Board Governance Program (BGP). This program supports SPO founders and CEOs in defining board roles, engaging members effectively, and leveraging the board as a strategic and values-aligned partner.

Now, with over 60 social sector leaders across five cohorts as alumni of this program, we're seeing firsthand how effective boards can become catalysts not just for organisational growth, but also for founders' resilience and long-term visioning.

Key Learnings from the Field
One of our most important takeaways has been that there is no single blueprint for a great board. Instead, what matters is:



- **Clarity of purpose:** Boards should be rooted in the mission and designed to support the founder's vision.
- **Defined roles:** Whether it's a governing board, advisory group, or informal champions, each member

ILSS Insights

Archana Ramachandran,
COO, ILSS

must know what's expected.

- **Mutual trust:** Founders need to feel safe sharing challenges and failures, not just wins. Likewise, board members must be able to offer feedback and step back, trusting the founder's judgment.

Holding the Present and Future Together

The most impactful boards we have seen are those that support both the short-term and long-term needs of an organisation. While the strategic advantage of 'zooming out' is vital, many founders also need a thought partner in the 'here and now', whether it's responding to a funder's exit, a key team member leaving, or navigating shifting external contexts.

This dual engagement, both strategic and tactical, is where board members truly become partners in the SPO's journey.

The Art and Science of Deeply Aligned Boards

Board mapping is both an art and a science. While alignment on skills, geography, and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) focus is important, what often determines the success of a board relationship is the chemistry between a board member and the founder — a shared sense of energy, values, and trust. As a young CEO who had set up the board after transitioning into leadership from the organisation's founder shared: *'For me, it's not just about the specific organisational domains — strategy, fundraising, people, partnerships, and so on — that board members support me on. There also has to be an energy match. I need to feel comfortable reaching out to an adviser when I need them. For example, can I text a board member when I'm feeling unsure about something and need another perspective, without worrying they'll see me as tentative? Do I feel comfortable picking up the phone to call them about something mission-critical and time-sensitive and know I can count on a timely response, if not immediately, but soon enough that I feel supported when it matters most.'*

We've seen this nuanced alignment come to life through our work with over 85 alumni of The ILSS Board Leadership Program, as we matched them with social sector organisations in need of advisory board members. These placements have reinforced our belief that beyond qualifications and experience, it is trust, alignment and mutual respect that truly enable meaningful board engagement.

Towards Lasting Impact

At ILSS, we view board effectiveness not as a fixed model, but as a dynamic partnership grounded in deep listening, value alignment, and continuous iteration. Eventually, advisory boards are not just about governance; they are ecosystems of support, challenge, and companionship for leaders trying to solve some of society's most pressing problems.

As we look ahead, we remain committed to strengthening this critical lever of organisational success, one board, one founder, and one partnership at a time. LI

Archana Ramachandran
COO, India Leaders for Social Sector

ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

Finding Balance

Building a Mission-Driven Advisory Board at **Adhyayan**

At the ILSS Centre of Excellence for Board and Governance, we believe that strong boards create strong organisations. Effective boards unlock hidden potential by guiding the organisation's leadership in the right direction. They help refine strategies, raise funds, course-correct when the founder faces challenges, and serve as a valuable sounding board for the CEO.

The experience of two ILSS alumni at the Adhyayan Foundation illustrates what a truly effective board partnership could look like. When Adhyayan reached a critical stage of growth, its **CEO, Anushri Alva**, an alum of The ILSS Fundraising Program, realised the organisation needed more than good intentions from its advisory board. It needed structure, clarity, and a renewed sense of purpose. Around the same time, Jagdish Acharya, having just completed The ILSS Board Leadership Program, was looking for ways to apply his learning in a real-world context. **Jagdish serves as the CEO of the Paints & Coatings Skill Council** and has over 40 years of global leadership in the paints industry with Asian Paints and PPG, and currently serves on multiple corporate and nonprofit boards. Their paths crossed, and together they worked towards shaping a board that would not just advise but actively partner in Adhyayan's mission.

Alumni Spotlight

Adhyayan Foundation | Vishakha Singh, Program Manager, ILSS

From the very beginning, Anushri's attempt was to have an advisory board to fill gaps in her team's expertise. But by 2024, as the organisation grew, it became clear that the board needed a sharper, updated mandate aligned with Adhyayan's evolving goals. She and her team redefined this mandate, re-engaged existing members to confirm their interest, and invited new members whose expertise matched the organisation's growth needs. The result was an advisory board built on clarity and action: a mandate rooted in both member expertise and organisational priorities, hands-on involvement through action groups, and member-led meetings anchored in field visits. There was a constant push for regular updates, clear documentation, and open feedback to ensure that the board remained both engaged and effective.

A Mission-Driven Partnership

After completing The ILSS Board Leadership Program, Jagdish Acharya was invited to join Adhyayan as an Adviser. He decided to accept only after he was convinced he could bring genuine value to the organisation—and equally, that Adhyayan believed he could. As he explains it, 'Effective governance is a partnership where both sides recognise the comfort, trust, and value of working together.'

> *What attracted Jagdish was Adhyayan's focus on addressing the root causes of systemic failures in education rather than just the symptoms.*

What attracted Jagdish was Adhyayan's focus on addressing the root causes of systemic failures in education rather than just the symptoms. 'Their emphasis on strengthening school leadership and creating sustainable change resonated deeply with me, and I felt compelled to contribute in the best way I could,' he reflects.

For Jagdish, this alignment is what distinguishes a board that is merely functional from one that genuinely advances an organisation's mission. A mission-driven board, he explains, consists of members who are deeply committed to the purpose and outcomes of the organisation. In the context of an education nonprofit, this means council members show a strong dedication to the mission, use their expertise effectively, and dedicate time beyond scheduled meetings to support the work on the ground.

From Ideas to Impact

According to Anushri, commitment has been evident in Jagdish's engagement from the very beginning. 'He began by meeting our team multiple times, then visiting two of our field sites. After each visit, he shared detailed notes, which gave us not only fresh ideas but also a clear signal of his investment.'

Alumni Spotlight

Adhyayan Foundation

Vishakha Singh, Program Manager, ILSS

Since joining, Jagdish has:

- Provided feedback on communications, fundraising, and organisational strategy — often sharing written reflections beyond meetings.
- Supported fundraising directly, including organising an awareness luncheon with his peers.
- Been a constant source of encouragement, celebrating small wins and asking thoughtful questions that sustain the team's energy during challenging moments.

Lessons for the Sector

For board members transitioning from corporate backgrounds, Jagdish emphasises that the most important shift is recognising that, while structured thinking and problem-solving skills are valuable, they must be applied with humility, patience, and openness to the social context.

'In the corporate world, there's often a tendency to intellectualise discussions and jump to solutions,' he notes. 'In the social sector, this risks overlooking the lived realities that shape outcomes. To be effective, you must invest time visiting the field, meeting stakeholders, and observing work on the ground. It builds empathy, insight, and relevance.'

Corporate professionals must embrace unstructured, iterative processes and bring expertise in a way that empowers rather than dominates. 'It is as much about receiving as giving, as much about learning as guiding.'

He adds that corporate professionals must embrace unstructured, iterative processes and bring expertise in a way that empowers rather than dominates. 'It is as much about receiving as giving, as much about learning as guiding.'

Anushri, reflecting on her journey, distils three key lessons for founders and CEOs working with boards:

- **Select board members thoughtfully.** Choose those whose values align with your mission and who have already shown genuine investment.
- **Establish constructive feedback systems.** Clear processes for evaluation and dialogue ensure accountability and evolution.
- **Foster communication and field engagement.** Keep members informed, involve them regularly, and encourage firsthand exposure to the work.

The Adhyayan story is a reminder that boards can not be passive structures; they are living partnerships. When leaders create space for shared ownership, and members bring humility, expertise, and trust, boards move beyond formality to become catalysts for growth.

As we reflect on the state of boards in India, this example offers a hopeful direction: governance that is participatory, transparent, and above all, mission-driven. For Adhyayan, this is still a journey in progress, as its leaders and board members learn together what kinds of engagement work best and where they can make the greatest impact side by side.

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Have a look at the AQEF team and board here:

Adhyayan Foundation

The Adhyayan Foundation is committed to ensuring every child in India receives high-quality education, regardless of their socio-economic background, location, or circumstances. They firmly believe that every child deserves the opportunity to unlock their full potential. To this end, the foundation enables and supports government schools to create child-centred and inclusive learning environments which lay the groundwork for a child's future.

Adviser to Adhyayan Foundation

JAGDISH ACHARYA, CEO, Paints & Coatings Skill Council

ALUNMI SPOTLIGHT

Purposeful Partnership

Transforming Governance at **Foster & Forge**

For **Meghna Chawla, Founder of Foster & Forge**, building an engaged and active board has always been about intent. She is clear that boards can either be deeply strategic or risk becoming symbolic. She believes, 'The pluses are immense. The thought leadership that brings fresh perspectives, a mission-first lens that keeps us grounded, and a customer orientation that ensures we never lose sight of whom we serve. But these don't happen by default. It takes design and regular nurturing to ensure the board stays active, relevant, and truly value-adding.'

That is exactly what she found in Ruchira Raj and Mannu Bhatia, both Alumni of The ILSS Board Leadership Program, whose journeys with the organisation are reshaping what board engagement can look like. The approach is immersive. Board members are invited into program spaces, introduced to stakeholders, and encouraged to roll up their sleeves alongside the team. 'Once they experience it, the mission speaks for itself. The secret sauce

is simple. Get them to solve problems with us, not just hear about them. That shared journey creates genuine investment.'

Ruchira Raj: Flexibility and Perspective
Ruchira's involvement has been instinctive and spontaneous from the very beginning. **Ruchira Raj has over two decades of experience with Accenture, PepsiCo and Standard Chartered Bank**, spanning consulting, brand management, compliance, risk governance and process transformation. An executive coach and psychotherapist, Ruchira was drawn to Foster & Forge not just for its cause but for the connection she felt with Meghna. 'It was less about education and more about the leader, the faith, the immense trust Meghna evoked in our very first conversation. That's what drew me in.' Ruchira often describes the role of a board member as being like a diver — willing to go deep enough to understand, but surfacing to offer perspective without being entangled in day-to-day execution. This stance has allowed her to be both supportive and challenge constructively.

Ruchira's role has been critical. For Meghna, it isn't just the tactical support that matters. 'Ruchira has been a nurturing presence on the board, bringing the kind of energy that felt especially meaningful — a woman on the board standing alongside a woman founder. What I've cherished most is her openness and willingness to engage in whatever way was needed, both for the organisation and for me personally. Her generosity of wisdom, networks, and encouragement has felt less like a formal role and more like a true ally on the journey.'


Image source: Foster & Forge Website

Mannu Bhatia: Structure and Strategy
Where Ruchira brings flexibility and perspective, Mannu Bhatia contributes structure and strategic discipline. **A former Senior Vice President of Finance and Transformation at PepsiCo in Dubai, Mannu brings a wealth of corporate and governance experience.** His focus at Foster & Forge has been on building systems and frameworks that enable scale without diluting quality. He has supported the organisation in creating sub-committees to deepen focus, strengthening the strategic

Alumni Spotlight

Foster & Forge

Tapoja Mukherji,
Senior Manager, ILSS

The real strength of this equation lies not just in what each board member brings individually, but in how they complement one another.

plan, and navigating the delicate balance between influencing school systems and engaging with district administrations. According to Mannu, 'The Board has to be invested in the work that the organisation is doing and needs to understand the various forces that are at play.' He brings the rigour of corporate governance while adapting it thoughtfully to the requirements of the social sector.

The real strength of this equation lies not just in what each board member brings individually, but in how they complement one another. Mannu believes the board can bring in a diversity of expertise for a nonprofit. 'Board members need to divide their energies and focus on areas of their speciality by forming sub-committees with the operating team.

Image source: Foster & Forge Website

This allows the Board to be aware of the challenges, and they can then leverage their experience and expertise to help the organisation navigate those challenges.'

For Meghna, it is the trust she shares with the board members that makes the partnership work. She feels free to be candid about challenges, knowing that the feedback will be constructive, and not personal. The board, in turn, sees itself as a sounding board, where partners guide without taking over. Mannu believes, 'The Board has to have the ability to step back and look at the big picture and fulfil the governance role as well as reviewing performance against the mission.' His guidance has helped the team think more deliberately about when to expand, where to focus, and how to measure success in terms that go beyond scale alone.

An Evolving Partnership

The Foster & Forge story shows that boards are not passive structures but living partnerships. When leaders invite shared ownership, and board members bring humility, expertise and trust, governance becomes a catalyst for growth rather than a checklist.

For Meghna, Ruchira, and Mannu, this partnership is still evolving, an ongoing process of discovering what engagement works best and which priorities can be pursued together. However, it already offers a hopeful direction for the sector: governance that is participatory, transparent, and, above all, mission-driven.

Have a look at the AQEF team and board here:

FnF was established with the belief that every child has the potential to positively impact their environment and contribute meaningfully to the growth of the country. what they need is the opportunity to explore their potential to build their capabilities and role models to inspire and show them the way. This is where the network of 575000 teachers step in, playing a revolutionary role in not only accelerating learning but also building capable citizens.

Advisers to Foster & Forge (L-R)

Ruchira Raj, Psychotherapist, Wabi Sabi Coach, Board Adviser to SPOs

Mannu Bhatia, Retired Sr Vice President Finance & Transformation, PepsiCo

Strengthening Systems, Deepening Impact

Reimagining Foundational Learning in India

*In a recent webinar on '**The Social Sector: Then and Now,'** organised by the **ILSS Centre of Excellence for Board and Governance, ILSS Founder-CEO, Anu Prasad,** engaged in a compelling conversation with **Dr Dhir Jhingran, Founder and Executive Director of the Language and Learning Foundation (LLF).** A former IAS officer, Dr Jhingran has served in senior policymaking roles at the Ministry of Education, as senior adviser to UNICEF India, and as Regional Director with Room to Read, in addition to authoring several books on primary education. Through LLF, he is working to strengthen foundational learning at scale by working closely with governments across India. The dialogue explored his journey from policymaker to social entrepreneur, LLF's systemic approach to education reform, and the governance lessons that can guide organisations in the sector. Here are some edited excerpts from the conversation.*

Anu (Q/): Your transition from government roles to founding the Language and Learning Foundation is exceptional. What led you to set up the foundation?

Dhir (A/): I developed a deep interest in education during the total literacy campaigns of the 1980s and 90s. Watching children remain passive while teachers delivered long lectures convinced me that something was fundamentally wrong with our methods. Within the IAS, I deliberately sought education postings, leading the District Primary Education Program, serving as state education secretary, and working in the Ministry of HRD. But given the frequent rotations across sectors, I eventually faced a choice: move to other departments or commit fully to education. I chose the latter and founded the Language and Learning Foundation (LLF).

Our organisational design reflected three strategic principles: an exclusive focus on foundational learning where gaps were largest, a commitment to scale, and government collaboration as our primary approach for systemic impact. Today, LLF operates across 10 states, engaging in traditionally government-held domains such as curriculum design, teacher training, and assessment systems, moving beyond program delivery to actual program design and systemic strengthening.

Q/ From the very beginning, you chose to work with the government, even when many nonprofits preferred to operate in parallel. How has that journey unfolded?

A/ In 2015–17, very few organisations engaged directly with government systems, so we had to approach state governments proactively. We chose professional development as our entry

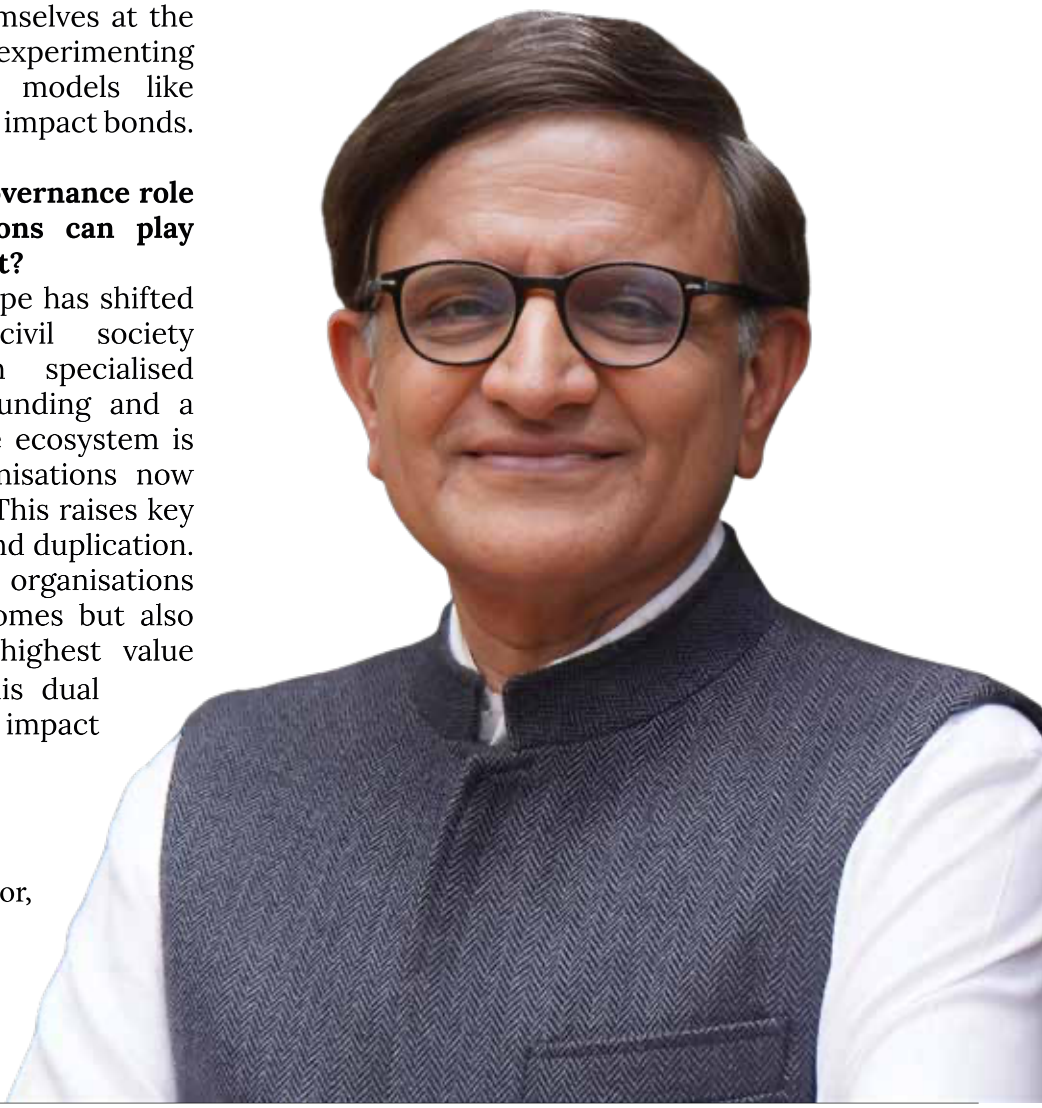
The Language and Learning Foundation (LLF) works with government education systems to strengthen Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) among children. LLF trains and supports teachers, mentors, and officials in child-centred practices and develops contextually relevant materials, including multilingual and local-language resources. Since 2015, LLF has partnered with 10 state governments to integrate foundational literacy into government programs, reaching 1.62 crore children and 10.85 lakh teachers.

point, which gave us access to run courses and training programs. As the sector matured, we built coalitions, recognising that lasting solutions required collaborative governance.

With the launch of NIPUN Bharat in 2021, governments became more proactive in seeking partnerships with civil society not just for delivery, but also for program design, curriculum development, training, and assessments. Over time, we reintroduced demonstration programs to show how governments could drive learning improvements themselves at the district level, while also experimenting with innovative financing models like outcome-based funding and impact bonds.

Q/ Is there any unique governance role social purpose organisations can play that the government cannot?

A/ The governance landscape has shifted fundamentally. Earlier, civil society organisations worked in specialised niches; today, with CSR funding and a proliferation of players, the ecosystem is crowded, with many organisations now having government MOUs. This raises key questions of coordination and duplication. The real demand now is for organisations that not only deliver outcomes but also strengthen systems. The highest value nonprofits can bring is this dual mandate: measurable impact



Dr Dhir Jhingran,
Founder and Executive Director,
Language and Learning
Foundation (LLF)

ILSS Conversation

combined with building government capacity for sustainable change.

Q/ As a founder, what were your biggest organisational challenges in building LLF, particularly the governance and systems aspects, besides the programmatic work?
A/ Our biggest challenge has been preserving organisational DNA while scaling from 100 to 801,046 teachers, maintaining quality and mission-driven rigour and not losing what made us effective in the first place. We have had to develop sophisticated governance systems, including operational protocols, field checklists, and internal accountability measures, to ensure that everyone works within the same institutional standards.

The second challenge has been navigating continuity in government partnerships through constant changes in political leadership. We learned that sustainable partnerships require building professional relationships across all levels, like block, district, and mid-tier officials, who provide institutional memory when political leadership shifts. This multi-level relationship strategy demands significant investment but proves essential for program continuity.

Q/ With operations across 10 states, what is your expansion governance strategy — broader reach or deeper engagement?
A/ Expansion decisions are complex, especially in large states like Uttar Pradesh that demand long-term commitment. Our core principle is to never voluntarily exit a state and to prioritise depth over breadth.

We follow three criteria: avoiding oversaturated states where many organisations compete; ensuring new expansion does not compromise the quality of existing programs, which makes us conservative about growth; and targeting educationally disadvantaged districts with marginalised populations.

This values-driven approach explains our strong presence in the tribal areas of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Odisha. Every expansion is carefully deliberated, weighing impact potential, relationship-building capacity, and alignment with our mission to

Image source: Linkedin

serve marginalised communities.

Q/ LLF has a diverse governance structure with trustees, an advisory board, and other guiding groups. How do you manage this complexity while staying aligned to your mission?

A/ Our structure is by design. Trustees handle legal compliance while providing strategic direction. The advisory board was our strategic innovation, purely advisory but serving critical functions: domain expertise, networks, credibility, and strategic counsel. It took us three years to establish, focusing on education professionals with government experience and leaders skilled in scaling without compromising quality.

Our strong organisational vision ensures all discussions remain anchored to our foundational scope. While board members may suggest new directions, debates stay productive because the mandate is respected. We welcome disagreements for sharper decisions, but final authority rests with the organisation. By maintaining clear boundaries between advisory input and executive decisions, we turn diversity into a strength, with each member bringing complementary perspectives to strategic thinking.

Q/ Have you considered board tenure policies, given that many governance experts recommend term limits?

A/ We have wrestled with the continuity versus renewal governance dilemma. We extended our initial board tenure once, requesting that all members continue, as we were at a critical organisational inflection point, expanding operations and deepening government system engagement, where institutional memory was invaluable.

We have added new members over recent years to add new expertise in corporate strategy, communications, and education technology as needs evolved, while maintaining core continuity. Some existing board members occasionally suggest stepping down to make room for new talent, but we have prioritised institutional continuity until now. We may reassess this approach as we mature institutionally.

Q/ Beyond quarterly meetings, how do you maintain continuous board engagement throughout the year?

A/ We go beyond formal meetings by making board engagement immersive. Our meetings are often three-day sessions in operational states with field visits, turning members into informed stakeholders who see ground realities firsthand. We also integrate our senior leadership team into board interactions, enabling direct engagement, informal mentorship, and the flow of expertise across the organisation and not just to the founder.

We also learned that board engagement works best when it grows organically. Early on, we tried a mechanistic approach — mapping expertise to needs on spreadsheets and making targeted requests — but it felt forced and was ineffective. The most impactful contributions have come voluntarily, through relationships. For example, one board member independently led our complete rebranding strategy.

We now focus on creating space for such organic engagement while strategically leveraging members' networks for government introductions, corporate partnerships, or navigating bureaucratic hurdles.

We now focus on creating space for such organic engagement while strategically leveraging members' networks for government introductions, corporate partnerships, or navigating bureaucratic hurdles. The key is timing: most members are eager to contribute, so the challenge lies in aligning their expertise with institutional needs at the right moment.

Q/ What process do you follow while onboarding new board members?

A/ We recognise our onboarding is still evolving, but our strategy includes one-on-one orientations with detailed materials, followed by field visits and direct team interactions. Field exposure is critical, as boardroom discussions often differ greatly from ground realities.

We also dedicate meeting time to contextualising discussions within program frameworks. This may limit deep strategic dives, but it ensures board members give relevant, grounded guidance rather than generic advice.

Q/ What advice would you offer to senior leaders considering joining the boards of social purpose organisations?

A/ Effective governance begins with preparation. First, understand both the nonprofit ecosystem and the organisation's sector and refrain from demonstrating immediate impact until you grasp institutional dynamics. Second, engage with existing board members to learn unspoken governance norms. Third, build relationships beyond the founder by meeting senior staff. And fourth, prioritise field exposure to understand implementation realities.

The most effective board members identify a clear niche for their contribution rather than trying to influence everything.

The most effective board members identify a clear niche for their contribution rather than trying to influence everything. Patience, coupled with systematic institutional learning, is essential before making strategic contributions.

Q/ What is your dynamic with your board chair, and how do you manage that governance relationship?

A/ Our board chair is a distinguished leader in the education sector. We anchor our governance relationship through transparency and consultation, briefing her thoroughly before meetings, walking through agenda items so she is well-prepared for strategic discussions. Her input is especially valuable when considering new board members, where she is our first point of consultation.

At the same time, our governance culture is intentionally non-hierarchical. In meetings, everyone contributes equally, enabling reflective and open discussions rather than top-down dynamics. Advance briefings simply ensure smoother facilitation while preserving this collaborative spirit.

Q/ What systemic gaps do you see that could help make the development sector more effective?

A/ I see two major governance gaps: lack of coordination and short-term thinking.

On coordination, most organisations approach governments with their own agendas, which often creates lack of clarity on programmatic and implementation focus. What's needed is for governments to exercise their convening power in setting a clear direction and inviting organisations to plug in with specific expertise.

On short-term thinking, the pressure for quick results undermines sustainability. Even NIPUN Bharat expects proficiency within a few years, but lasting impact requires strengthening the autonomous capacity of government systems. Civil society should support this development, not substitute for this goal.

The proliferation of project management units (PMUs) is another concern. Uttar Pradesh alone has more than a dozen, but unless they build lasting state capacity, they risk leaving institutions weaker once projects end. This is a fundamental governance question: are we building resilient systems or fostering dependency? To address it, the sector needs stronger leadership development infrastructure so founders can navigate these institutional challenges effectively.

Q/ What essential leadership qualities are critical for sector leaders today in building resilient, sustainable organisational impact?

A/ The biggest challenge for sector leaders is defining success. Growth metrics — bigger budgets, larger teams, wider reach — can easily distract from the core purpose. The real question is: what are we actually changing for children, teachers, and other stakeholders beyond the numbers? This calls for leaders who prioritise stakeholder experience over evaluation reports, taking the time to understand how beneficiaries truly feel about the interventions.

Three essential leadership qualities stand out:
First, strategic thinking with five-year horizons. Leaders must analyse atleast shifting policies, ecosystems, and competitive landscapes to avoid reactive decisions and position their organisations proactively.

Second, organisational nimbleness. With rapid environmental change, leaders need to respond thoughtfully to government shifts and stakeholder feedback and evolve steadily without sudden, dramatic changes.

Third, dual competency. Effective leaders combine strategic vision with deep operational understanding. By understanding practices like teaching methodologies, they can connect authentically with staff and bridge high-level vision with on-ground execution.

Q/ As someone who has been a policymaker, practitioner, and founder, what gives you hope for the future of governance in the social sector?

A/ My optimism comes from looking for signs of institutional change. While overall system indicators may not always look transformative, there are consistent bright spots that show progress.
One example is the current high-level focus on student learning outcomes. A decade ago, it was hard to even start that conversation with governments. Learning was not prioritised. Today, it is central to governance discussions, marking a fundamental shift.

I also draw hope from grassroots perspectives, from teachers, parents, and communities describing the changes they see and feel. Large-scale evaluations often miss these voices, but they provide powerful evidence of institutional evolution.

Staying directly connected with schools and communities provides authentic feedback on governance transformation, offering insights that data alone often misses. While quantitative metrics may show only modest improvements, community voices frequently highlight significant institutional transformations in their daily experiences.

Hope, for me, lies in this combination of systemic policy change and grassroots transformation stories. Together, they provide a fuller picture and sustain long-term commitment to institutional change. LI

Image source: LLF Website

LANGUAGE and LEARNING FOUNDATION
Strong Foundation, Stronger Future.

https://languageandlearningfoundation.org

The interview is edited by Aashi Sengar

ILSS TIPS

Financial Governance for Nonprofit Leaders

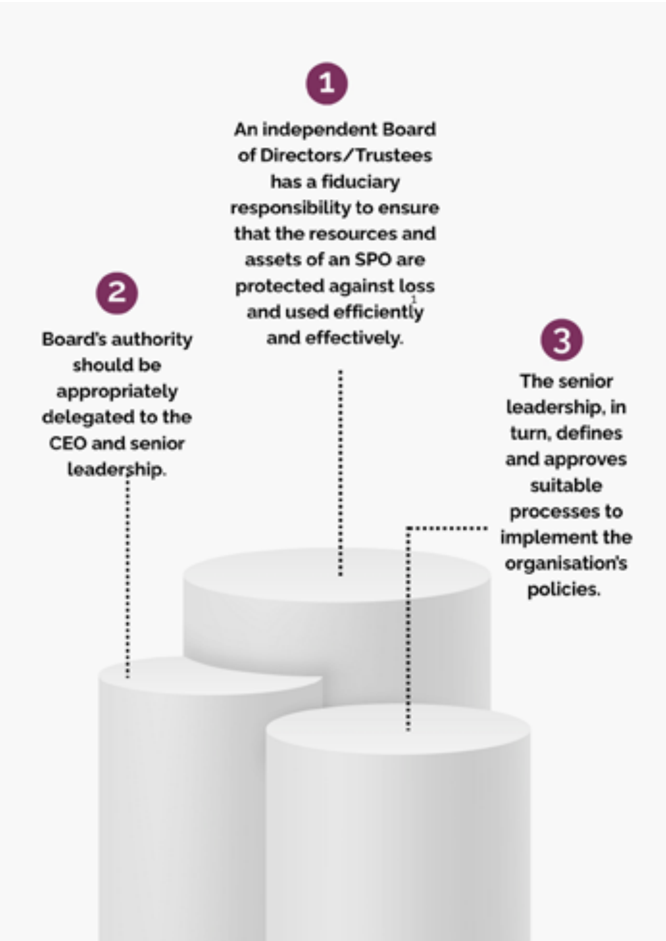
Governance, financial management and compliance are growing areas of focus for social purpose organisations (SPOs) in India. In addition to the requirement to comply with multiple statutes and regulations, the restrictions on available funding and its applications make financial planning and management a significant challenge.

In our recent conversations with SPO leaders, several common themes and challenges have emerged. Here are some pressing questions that SPOs grapple with, and the advice of our subject matter experts on ways of handling them.

ILSS Tips

Kavita Gunderia and Urmila Sampath,
Partners, LTM Advisors LLP and ILSS LP alumni

What are the key pillars necessary for good financial governance?
An effective financial governance framework should have these essential elements:



Financial governance is the responsibility of the finance team. Why should program managers or field staff have any involvement or responsibility?
Program leaders are often required to make decisions on various aspects of program implementation, including ways to procure and distribute program supplies, selecting vendors that are best suited, keeping expenditures within budgets, and assessing changes that may be required in program design or implementation. Many of these decisions have financial implications and require adherence to certain policies and processes. For example, avoiding conflicts of interest when identifying a vendor, approving advance payments, monitoring vendor performance, approving travel costs, communicating internally about possible cost escalations, etc.

What are the governance tools that can support program leaders and teams?
For the Board to fulfil its fiduciary responsibility of protecting the resources of the SPO, senior leaders and their teams need to operate in accordance with the Board-approved authority and policies. Some of the tools that organisations can implement to support their teams include:

- A risk management policy, processes and related training, which helps teams understand what risks arise while conducting their regular activities and the processes and related controls that help manage or mitigate these risks. For example, the risk of a conflict of interest when selecting vendors can be mitigated by requiring multiple independent price quotations for high-value procurement.
- A well-defined delegation of authority tool can clearly place responsibility for approving expenses and payments.
- Standardised templates for contracts can help manage risks arising from vendor performance through defined service obligations, staggered payments, and non-performance penalties, among other measures.

We usually have a funding constraint in the first quarter of the year but conversely struggle to complete utilisation of CSR funds by year-end. How do we manage this paradox?
Approval of grants and disbursement of funds by donors, especially CSR donors, usually occurs after the first quarter of the financial year, when corporate donors finalise their financial statements and seek Board approval for their CSR budgets. SPOs that are dependent on annual CSR grants, therefore, may face cash flow challenges during this period. Diversifying the donor mix, securing more multi-year funding, and building operational reserves through unrestricted donations are ways to mitigate this challenge.

Conversely, there is always pressure to utilise CSR funding by the year-end. Since this is a statutory requirement, SPO founders and leaders

ILSS Tips

Kavita Gunderia and Urmila Sampath,
Partners, LTM Advisors LLP and ILSS LP alumni

can build monitoring mechanisms to ensure compliance. These include periodic review of actual expenditure against budgets/funding raised and agility in highlighting potential areas of underspend due to changes in programs or external factors.

What are some financial planning considerations when managing organisational expenditure using funds sourced through both foreign and domestic grants?

Organisations that hold an approval under FCRA for receiving grants from foreign sources have to ensure that these funds are utilised in compliance with regulations.

Organisations that hold an approval under FCRA for receiving grants from foreign sources have to ensure that these funds are utilised in compliance with regulations. Some important aspects to consider when managing finances are:

- Planning expenditures in advance to ensure that there is no mingling of domestic and foreign funding by making payments from the appropriate accounts/donor funds.
- Planning fundraising activities to enable compliance, for example, ensuring that proposed donor budgets with funding for administrative activities are structured to comply with the regulatory limit of 20%.
- Tracking administrative expenses as incurred from foreign funds on a regular basis to comply with the regulatory limit of 20% for such expenditure.

What are some of the key financial metrics that SPO leaders should review and report to the Board?

A periodic (at least quarterly) review of these critical financial metrics can help the CEO and senior management of an SPO understand the organisation's financial health and identify challenges for early intervention.

- Funding raised against budgets to ensure seamless financing for planned programs and activities.
- Expenditure forecasts against budgets to understand potential under or overspends.
- Expected fund inflows against expenditure forecasts (by category in case of both domestic and foreign funding) to identify potential funding deficits.
- Operational and long-term reserves used or replenished, and the number of months of expenses these could cover.
- Donor utilisations and any changes in spending patterns are to be highlighted to donors.
- Unit costs for output/impact metrics, which may be tracked as a measure of financial efficiency.

These metrics may be more detailed where there are multiple programs or locations, in accordance with the complexity of each organisation.

ILSS Tips

Kavita Gunderia and Urmila Sampath,
Partners, LTM Advisors LLP and ILSS LP alumni

In summary, financial governance operates in a cyclical manner, where budgets and policies approved by the Board are periodically monitored based on their implementation. The review process, in turn, informs any changes, corrections, or improvements that are required to be initiated by senior management and the Board for the next cycle. While the finance function holds and curates this responsibility, it is imperative for organisational and functional leaders to understand how their roles and responsibilities interact with and affect the financial well-being of the organisation. LI

Kavita Gunderia and **Urmila Sampath**, both chartered accountants, are the co-founders of LTM Advisors, which specialises in strengthening financial management, reporting, and governance frameworks in nonprofits.

Sources:

1. *Charitable purpose' has varied definitions under statutes related to public trusts, societies and companies as well as for income tax purposes. These definitions are largely inclusive in nature. While specifying examples of charitable objects, such as relief of poverty, promotion of education, medical relief, etc., they also cover advancement of similar objects of general public utility.*

GUEST COLUMN

Building Strong Advisory Boards

Reflections from my Journey in the Social Sector

Tara Singh Vachani
Executive Chairperson of Antara Senior Care
and Vice Chairperson of Max India Limited

Tara Singh Vachani brings a rare blend of corporate leadership and social sector engagement to the conversation on boards. As Executive Chairperson of Antara Senior Care and Vice Chairperson of Max India Limited, she leads at the highest levels of business while actively shaping the social impact agenda through the Max India Foundation.

Her extensive board experience spans prestigious institutions like the Indian School of Business, Teach For India's National and Delhi boards, The Vedica Scholars Program for Women, and the KARM Fellowship. This unique vantage point across business, philanthropy, education, and social change makes Tara one of the most qualified voices to reflect on the role and importance of boards in strengthening organisations.

Tara in a TFI classroom in east Delhi (Image source: Teach For India)

Guest Column

Tara Singh Vachani
Executive Chairperson of Antara Senior Care and Vice Chairperson of Max India Limited

When I reflect on my journey with boards in the social sector, one lesson stands out above all: the importance of establishing an advisory board early in the life of an organisation. Too often, I've noticed that social purpose organisations (SPOs) wait until they are well into their operations or until a crisis emerges before thinking about governance. The challenges pile up. The absence of structured support that a board brings can leave a leader feeling unanchored and out of depth at moments of crisis.

I've noticed that social purpose organisations (SPOs) wait until they are well into their operations or until a crisis emerges before thinking about governance.

That's why I believe it's never too early to form a board. Even if it's just two or three people at the beginning, who can provide structure, guidance, and accountability in the earliest stages, even before the organisation has secured significant long-term funding, that initial anchor can make all the difference.

Boards, at their best, exist to support the founder/CEO. Yet, too often I hear people talk about 'managing' their boards, as though they are juggling egos and emotions. Leaders need to set clear expectations that a board's role is to support their success and not to create yet another layer of governance to 'manage'. To me, that language already sets the wrong tone. A structured board should feel like a partnership that shows up regularly, spends time, and goes deep with the leader to guide the organisation forward.

Another thing to keep in mind is that boards are not static. They need to be revisited every few years as the organisation evolves. Every few years, it is worth reassessing and even revamping the board to ensure that the board's composition reflects the organisation's changing needs.

A pivotal part of creating a board is to identify the right board chairperson. ring breadth of perspective and adaptability. Just as important is choosing the chairperson. The chair doesn't need to be an expert in your sector, but they must believe passionately in your mission

Guest Column

Tara Singh Vachani
Executive Chairperson of Antara Senior Care
and Vice Chairperson of Max India Limited

and have the organisational skills to keep the group on track. The relationship between the chair and the CEO is critical. It should be one of equality where both are able to challenge, support, and push each other.

When I think about what makes a good board member, I would recommend a leader to look for people who have had to wear different hats and navigate complexity in their careers. Such board members would bring breadth of perspective and adaptability.

Tara (Chairperson of the Delhi Board) at the TFI Delhi Board Meeting with the advisory board (Image source: Teach For India)

My own entry into this world was almost accidental. I had visited Teach For India (TFI) years earlier and had been inspired. But when I tried to organise a fundraiser for Teach for India, it failed. I felt disillusioned and decided that if I couldn't give 100% to the sector while also running my business, I should step back. And so I did, for a few years.

Then, in 2018, Anu Aga (Former Chairperson, Thermax Limited and Nominated Member of Rajya Sabha (2012-18) and Trustee at Teach for India) called me. She needed someone to chair the Delhi board for TFI, which was struggling to manage its rapid growth. It felt like an urgent ask. I hesitated, but after meeting Anu and Aakanksha Gulati (CEO - ACT Grants who was the then Delhi City Director), I felt something shift within me. My love for creating order out of chaos, combined with my respect for Anu and the power of Aakanksha's storytelling, pulled me in. I didn't even fully understand TFI's work at the time. I just knew I wanted to be part of it.

We formed the Delhi Regional Board in a very organic way. We needed legal expertise, so I brought in my friend, Akhil Sibal (Senior Advocate - Delhi High Court). We needed guidance on working with the government, and so we invited Amitav Virmani (Founder & CEO, The Education Alliance) for his rich experience at the intersection of education and government. Tarun Cherukuri (Founder-CEO, Indus Action) came in as an Alumni leader who had also previously been the City Director at Teach for India Delhi. And I had reached out to Anu Prasad (Founder & CEO, India Leaders for Social Sector) initially for recommendation of board members, and then when I urged her to be a part of our board, she joined too. Within a year, Aakanksha too transitioned from the city director to become a board member. There was no grand design, just thoughtful choices based on relationships and needs.

From the start, I emphasised renewal. I proposed that members, including myself, step down after two years. In the end, I stayed as the board chair for four years, but only because I found the role deeply purposeful and also because others asked me to. Eventually, Amitav took over as chair, which I think was exactly as it should be.

Guest Column

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Executive Chairperson of Antara Senior Care and Vice Chairperson of Max India Limited

One thing I learned quickly was the importance of structure. At TFI, we met every eight weeks for three hours. No marathon meetings, no endless PowerPoints.

One thing I learned quickly was the importance of structure. At TFI, we met every eight weeks for three hours. No marathon meetings, no endless PowerPoints. We sent out a concise six-slide deck a week in advance. Meetings started with tea and icebreakers — yes, icebreakers! They might seem trivial, but they were transformative. They made us laugh, lowered barriers, and built bonds. Once a year, we had drinks or dinner together, and those informal moments were just as important.

We also designed project-based work for the board. Members teamed up on specific challenges, such as hiring, retention, fundraising, or government relations. We even gave the projects names to make them memorable and fun. This not only solved problems but also deepened members' connection to the organisation.

Looking back, one of the trickiest areas was fundraising. Initially, the board was hesitant. We thought we could make an impact without pushing too hard on money, especially since there was strong national support. But over time, as trust grew, board members became more proactive, even sourcing funds for specific projects. Some of what we started in Delhi ended up being replicated nationally, which was hugely satisfying.

I've also learned to set clear expectations on time. Asking board members to give four to six hours a quarter — broken into meetings and follow-ups — is realistic.

I've also learned to set clear expectations on time. Asking board members to give four to six hours a quarter — broken into meetings and follow-ups — is realistic. Anything more and you risk disengagement. Clarity upfront prevents frustration later.

And then there's the ever-debated question: should donors sit on boards? My answer: Maybe one or two, but not more. And certainly not if they're pushing to join. Donors give because they believe in your mission; loading them with governance responsibilities can sour the relationship. Better to set up clear structures for donor engagement than to hand them a board seat by default.

In the end, boards aren't about auditing numbers or ticking boxes. They're about creating a space where leaders can share their hardest challenges and get help thinking them through. They are about building genuine relationships among members so the group becomes greater than the sum of its parts. The ILSS Board Governance Program supports social sector leaders with exactly this - how to design their boards and think about who to invite on the board,how often to meet, how to set agendas and manage pre-reads and follow-ups, how to engage the board between meetings etc.

So if you're starting out, don't wait. Put a board in place early. Choose people who care deeply, who can adapt, who can bring energy and perspective. Find a chair who will anchor you without overshadowing you. Invest in building relationships through laughter, chai, and yes, even icebreakers.

A board, done right, is not something you "manage." It's a gift. It's your anchor, your sounding board, your safety net. And it might just be the difference between feeling alone at the top and knowing you are truly supported. LI

GUEST COLUMN

How to Effectively Communicate Difficult News to the Board

The 54-year-old Bob Iger was preparing for an upcoming board meeting. And he was not happy.

It was October 2005. Bob Iger had just become the CEO of global entertainment giant Disney, taking over from the long-serving Michael Eisner.

In preparation for his first board meeting, Iger had done some research on how Disney Animation — a core division of the company — was doing.

The news was not good:
The division had lost nearly $400 million in the last decade even as competitor Pixar had enjoyed a stunning run of critical and commercial success.

Pixar was also far ahead of Disney in terms of animation technology.

Further, Pixar had surpassed Disney as a brand that mothers of kids under twelve thought of as 'good for their family'.

The board was aware that Disney Animation was not doing well, but it would not have known the extent of the hole they were in. Iger wanted to give this tough message to his board in clear terms. He had the numbers from the financials and the brand research.

But he did not begin his presentation

Guest Column

Ravishankar Iyer,
Storytelling coach and consultant

to the board with numbers. He began with a personal story.

A few weeks earlier, Iger had attended the big launch event of Disney's latest theme park, the Hong Kong Disneyland. On a hot afternoon, Iger was standing with two of his colleagues (Tom Staggs and Dick Cook) as the famous opening parade came down on Main Street. Here's how Iger described the scene to the board members[1]:

"Float after float passed by us. There were floats carrying characters from Walt's legendary films: Snow White, Cinderella, Peter Pan and so on. And others with characters from the big hits of Michael's first decade: The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast, Aladdin and The Lion King. And there were floats with characters from the Pixar films: Toy Story and Monsters, Inc. and Finding Nemo. I turned to Tom and Dick and asked, 'Do you guys notice anything about this parade?' Nothing stood out to them. 'There are barely any Disney characters from the last ten years,' I said. We could spend months analysing what had gone wrong, but there it was, right in front of us. The movies weren't good, which meant the characters weren't popular or memorable, and that had significant ramifications for our business and our brand."

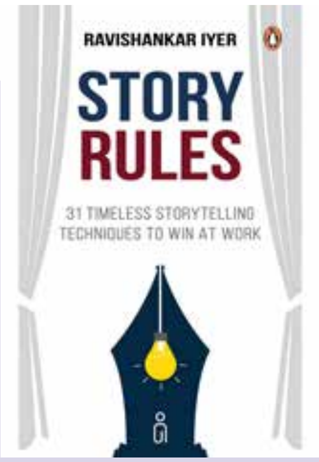
After sharing this story, Iger told the board

that Disney's business depended on the creation of memorable characters. For a company with such a legendary creative history, the drought of the last decade was not a good sign. He then went on to make his radical proposal — that Disney should acquire Pixar. After the initial shock, the board members gave him a cautious go ahead. In just around six months, Iger managed to complete the historic acquisition.

That acquisition completely revived Disney's fortunes. When Iger later reflected on his tenure at Disney, he called the Pixar deal 'probably the best' acquisition he made.[2] He credited Pixar with reviving Disney Animation's fortunes, leading to several Oscar-winning blockbusters such as Frozen, Moana and Zootopia.

And it all started with a simple story that Iger shared with his board.

When communicating with the Board, respect their time and wisdom.



KNOW MORE

Ravishankar Iyer is a storytelling coach and helps leaders sharpen their storytelling skills. Since 2016, he's trained over 9,000 mid-to-senior leaders across corporates and guided over 200 nonprofits on crafting a better pitch, enabling them to secure hundreds of millions of rupees in funding. His first book, Story Rules, is now available.

Guest Column

Ravishankar Iyer,
Storytelling coach and consultant

When communicating with the Board, respect their time, wisdom and keep some of these storytelling principles in mind:

- **Be vulnerable and tell the truth, especially if there is bad news:** Iger had been the company's Chief Operating Officer since 2000, and some of the board members even pointed the finger at him for the difficult state of affairs. But Iger was willing to take that criticism and look ahead
- **Share a clear path forward:** Follow that up with a clear diagnosis and a well thought-through action plan
- **Tell a story:** Iger could have focused just on the dry facts and stats. But by starting with a clear and vivid story, he put his point across in a more memorable way for his audience.

The beauty of these techniques is that they're universal — applicable across sectors (within corporates and nonprofits), functions and geographies. Of course, you'll have to keep your audience objectives and context in mind and make required tweaks.

These principles feature in 'Story Rules', my book on storytelling techniques for leaders at work. Packed with over 300 compelling real-life examples from the world of work, this practical guide shows how successful leaders seize crucial communication moments — and win. LI

Sources:

1. *Iger, Robert. The Ride of a Lifetime: Lessons in Creative Leadership from 15 Years as CEO of the Walt Disney Company (p. 131). (Function). Kindle Edition*
2. *'Bob Iger says Pixar was 'probably the best' acquisition he made during his tenure with Disney'. CNBC. Accessed from https://www.cnbc.com/2021/12/21/disneys-bob-iger-says-pixar-was-probably-the-best-acquisition-as-ceo.html on 16 February 2025*

Comics

Nonprofit Lingo

So..., are we profitable yet?"

Nonprofit Lingo

"Great session, everyone. We've solved nothing but it was productive."

LEADERSHIP INSPIRED

All A-board the Governance Express

1. What's the primary role of an advisory board in a nonprofit?
a) Legal compliance
b) Day-to-day operations
c) Strategic guidance and support

2. What is the most effective way to ensure a board remains high-performing?
a) Conducting annual board self-assessments
b) Increasing board size every year
c) Limiting board meetings to once a year
d) Avoiding term limits to retain experience

3. What is a conflict of interest in the context of board governance?
a) Disagreement between board members
b) Personal or financial interest that could interfere with impartial decision-making
c) Lack of board consensus on strategic direction
d) Hiring a consultant without board approval

4. What is a common governance risk when board members are not regularly engaged?
a) Increased micromanagement of staff
b) More innovation and agility
c) Stronger checks and balances
d) Better communication with stakeholders

Correct Answer:
1. c) Strategic guidance and support
2. a) Conducting annual board self-assessments
3. b) Personal or financial interest that could interfere with impartial decision-making
4. a) Increased micromanagement of staff

What's On?

A list of upcoming social sector events

Curated by Team ILSS

India CSR Summit Awards

30 Oct

2025

This annual summit is one of the largest CSR forums in India, bringing together corporate leaders, NGO representatives, and government officials to discuss and showcase CSR initiatives. The summit includes awards, keynote sessions, and networking opportunities, making it a significant event for those involved in corporate social responsibility and social development

Click Here

Nobel Prize Dialogue Bengaluru

3 Nov

2025

Hosted by Nobel Prize Outreach in collaboration with the Tata Trusts, the Nobel Prize dialogue brings Nobel Prize laureates together with leading thinkers to explore ideas and challenges that matter to all of us. With the theme 'The Future We Want', the India dialogues will reflect on how investment in knowledge, creativity and our young people can build a world of joy, wonder and innovation that is more inclusive, sustainable, and equitable.

Click Here

India Philanthropy Forum 2025 London

6 Nov

2025

The third edition of the India Philanthropy Forum, London, will bring together philanthropists, next-gen leaders, foundations, sector experts, and academic institutions to strengthen the India–UK corridor for social impact. This exclusive one-day convening will focus on how collective will, knowledge, and networks can be mobilised to accelerate progress and build a more resilient and equitable India.

Click Here

The Koita Foundation Tech Awards 2025

The Koita Foundation Tech Awards 2025, launched in collaboration with India Development Review (IDR) and ILSS - India Leaders for Social Sector, will celebrate and support nonprofits that are leading this transformation. The awards will spotlight organisations using AI for Social Impact in areas such as education, healthcare, livelihoods, gender, and inclusion.

Click Here

Social Sector News

Educate Girls wins 2025 Ramon Magsaysay Award, first Indian NGO to receive the honour

Educate Girls has won the 2025 Ramon Magsaysay Award — Asia's equivalent of the Nobel Prize, honouring exceptional courage and selfless service to the people of Asia.

Know More

ILSS and Harish & Bina Shah Foundation Join Forces to Strengthen India's Social Impact Leadership

ILSS and the Harish & Bina Shah Foundation have launched the Harish and Bina Shah Centre for Talent and Leadership - an institution designed to fuel the next generation of visionary, values-driven changemakers.

Know More

India Fundraising Conference and India Women's Leadership Conference Dates Announced

The India Fundraising Conference 2025, hosted by ILSS and The Resource Alliance, brought together fundraisers, donors, and CSR leaders to explore the future of fundraising and sector-wide collaborations.

IFRC

IWLC

CSR Spending In India Soars As Companies Shift Focus To Impact And Inclusion

India's top-100 listed companies by market capitalisation spent a total of Rs 12,897 crore on CSR activities in FY24, reflecting a 29% increase from FY2022.

Read More

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