

Getting your Board on board

As a volunteer manager you see the impact of volunteers every day. You understand their value, the risks when they're unsupported, and the difference good systems make. But getting your Board to truly see volunteering as strategic can be challenging.

This guide offers practical ways to build a strong volunteer culture and bring your Board along with you.

Speak the Board's Language

Boards are responsible for managing risk and ensuring long-term sustainability. Frame volunteering in these terms:

- Clearly explain what services, programmes, or outcomes rely on volunteers
- Identify risks when volunteers are under-resourced (turnover, safety, reputation)
- Link volunteer support directly to organisational impact and strategic goals
- Use simple data to illustrate exposure (numbers of volunteers, hours, critical roles)

Position volunteer investment as risk mitigation and impact protection, not an optional cost.

Make Volunteer Impact Visible

Boards can't value what they don't see. When volunteering is largely invisible at governance level, it is easy for its importance and its risks to be underestimated. Making volunteer contribution visible helps Boards understand impact, dependency, and where support is needed:

- Include a short volunteer update in regular Board reports
- Share one volunteer story that demonstrates impact
- Present basic data: number of volunteers, hours, retention, roles
- Invite a volunteer to speak briefly at a Board meeting (even once a year)

Build a Volunteer-Positive Culture Internally

Culture is shaped long before it reaches the Board table.

- Encourage staff to see volunteers as partners, not helpers
- Celebrate volunteer contributions across the organisation
- Share successes where volunteers improved outcomes
- Model respect, recognition, and inclusion in everyday practice

Ask for Small, Strategic Wins

You don't need everything at once. Start by asking for:

- A small, dedicated volunteer budget line
- Formal recognition of volunteers in annual reporting
- Inclusion of volunteering in strategy or risk discussions
- A Board champion for volunteering

Small governance shifts can lead to long-term change.

External Resources

Sometimes Boards hear things differently from outside their organisation. External framing can help move conversations from "nice to have" to "necessary".

- Share governance-focused resources (like A Volunteer Guide for Boards)
- Reference Volunteering NZ Best Practice Guidelines
- Invite an external perspective to validate your approach

Advocating for volunteers can feel exhausting but it is important work. Building Board understanding takes time, repetition, and the right framing.

