



## How to Review Documentation as a Method of Collecting Data About an Organization

### Description

The review of documentation is often the first place to start when trying to learn more about an organization. There is usually a large amount of useful documentation that management can promptly provide. You can usually review the documentation without requiring a lot of time from the management. Of course, what you look for and what you conclude depend on the purposes and the questions to be addressed by your research.

### What You Can Learn from Reviewing Documentation

Some things to look for are:

- Completeness – Have they produced the typical documents that you would expect for their particular stage in organizational development, for example, do they have an organization chart, strategic plan, job descriptions, personnel policies, fiscal policies and procedures, and financial reports, ? If so, then they probably value completeness and accuracy.
- Currency – How up-to-date is the documentation? If it's up-to-date, then they probably value timeliness.
- Scope – Does the documentation include the typical contents of that particular type of document? If so, then they probably value understanding and accuracy.
- Depth – How in-depth is the content of the document? If it is in-depth, then they probably value thoroughness.
- Alignment – For example, does the content between the documents seem consistent and complementary? If so, then they probably are fairly clear in their thinking and management.
- Authorship – Who has developed the various documents? If it is appropriate authors, for example, the CEO is not doing the Board's documents, then they probably value having clear roles.
- So what have you learned about:
  - How their culture values completeness, timeliness, understanding and accuracy, thoroughness, clear thinking and management?
  - How might those be related to the causes of the organization's current situation?
  - How might you manage your relationship with management?
  - Any specific information in the documents that you still want to learn more about?
- What does management say about each item, for example, do they recognize it is not complete and can they can specify what is yet to be done with it? Or, are they particularly proud of it?

*(The table on the following page lists common types of organizational documentation, their contents and what to look for when analyzing the documentation.)*

## Common Types of Documentation and What to Look For

Item	Typical Contents	Some questions to consider for now (in addition to completeness, currency, etc.)
Strategic Plan	Mission, external and internal analyses, goals, objectives, action plans, budget	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ How complete and thorough did they do the planning?</li> <li>▪ Do goals and actions result from strategic analyses?</li> <li>▪ How is implementation of the Plan monitored?</li> <li>▪ How much of their Plan has been implemented?</li> </ul>
Business plans / program plans for nonprofits	Product description, marketing plan, management plan, financials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Plans exist for each type of product or service?</li> <li>▪ Are there goals for each product or service?</li> <li>▪ Are there evaluations of the delivery and results?</li> <li>▪ Are the evaluation results used for improvements?</li> </ul>
Board policies and procedures	Bylaws, staffing the Board, attendance and conflict-of-interest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Are the standard Board policies in place?</li> <li>▪ Are they up-to-date?</li> <li>▪ Are members following those policies?</li> </ul>
Board meeting minutes	Documentation of attendance, quorum, discussions and decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Board-approved minutes for each Board meeting?</li> <li>▪ Are they achieving a quorum in each meeting?</li> <li>▪ Are discussions strategic and resulting in decisions?</li> <li>▪ Dealing with continually absent Board members?</li> </ul>
Personnel policies	Policies regarding compensation and performance management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Are the policies approved by the Board?</li> <li>▪ Are the policies up-to-date?</li> <li>▪ Have all employees been trained on the policies?</li> </ul>
Employee organization chart	Positions, titles and reporting relationships among positions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Is it up to date?</li> <li>▪ Reasonable number of direct reports to each position?</li> <li>▪ Are lines of authority actually being followed?</li> </ul>
Job descriptions	General duties and responsibilities, min/max qualifications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Does every role / job have a description?</li> <li>▪ Are they up-to-date?</li> <li>▪ Broad enough for versatility in the job, yet specific enough to reference for performance appraisals?</li> <li>▪ Are they duplicative of other jobs in the organization?</li> </ul>
Financial information	Budgets, income statements, balance sheets, cash flows and audit reports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Fiscal policies and procedures approved by the Board?</li> <li>▪ Which reports are reviewed, by whom, when?</li> <li>▪ Have they been operating at a profit? How long?</li> <li>▪ Do they have sufficient cash to pay bills now?</li> </ul>
Evaluations	Processes' strengths, weaknesses and results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Are they systematically evaluating the Board? Employees? Products and services? Other?</li> <li>▪ What are they doing with the results of the evaluations?</li> </ul>
Other assessment reports?	Processes' strengths, weaknesses and results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Any other organizational assessment results?</li> <li>▪ Are they within the past five years?</li> <li>▪ If so, did they implement its recommendations?</li> </ul>