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The Governance Institute

Standardizing Governance across the System

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Health system governance is often complex. There are different boards, each with their own responsibilities, levels of authority, and culture; yet all need to be rowing in the same direction to advance the system's mission and vision. The governance support team plays an essential role in ensuring governance practices are aligned across the system. Having a unified approach to governance will allow for consistent processes, more efficient decision making, clear roles, easier best-practice sharing, and ultimately promote a greater sense of systemness. This article highlights governance documents, tools, and practices governance support professionals (GSPs) can standardize to create a more unified approach to governance systemwide.

Meeting Materials

Standardizing meeting materials is always a good place to start. GSPs can implement standardized templates for agendas, minutes, executive summary pages, dashboards, and other documents included in the board's meeting materials. The system-level governance support team should develop these templates,[1] train GSPs throughout the organization around how to effectively utilize the documents, and then make them easily accessible.

An added advantage is having a common, secure board portal for board and committee members across the system. Using the same tool means all boards are accessing materials and communicating in a similar fashion. This also enables all serving in governance to access specific materials related to the system, its governance, or even have shared educational materials.[2]

1   For sample templates, see The Governance Institute's template collection at www.governanceinstitute.com/templates.
2   Pamela Knecht, "Governance Practices that Support Systemness," Subsidiary Focus, The Governance Institute, October 2022.

Annual Calendar

At the end of the year, the system governance or executive committee should commit time preparing the board plan for the upcoming year, with leadership from the system CEO and board chair, support from the GSPs, and approval from the full board. This calendar often lists which items will be reviewed and approved at system board meetings (e.g., strategic plan, audit, operating budget, executive performance and compensation, etc.) and prioritizes board education topics. The subsidiary boards and committees can then review and create a plan that appropriately aligns with the system board's work.

Sample Calendar: Meetings by Focus Area/Strategic Pillars

2025	February	April	June	August	October	December
Strategic Focus:	2025 strategic plan review & 2024 performance	Community needs assessment	Mid-year performance review	Annual audit & compliance update	Board succession planning	Board self-assessment & performance review
Performance Metrics:	2024 strategy metrics	Operational dashboard	Strategic initiative metric tracker	Audit findings & conflict-of-interest dashboard	Operational dashboard	Goals achieved; 2024 plan and operational dashboard
Board Education:	DE&I President & CEO "state of the union"	Quality	Audit & Compliance Regional, state, and federal legislation updates/ implications	President & CEO update Intentional Governance	Innovation & technology	Year-end review of system strategy

Governance Documents

In addition to standardizing meeting materials, GSPs can work with general counsel to standardize (to the extent possible) additional governance documents, such as bylaws, charters, and governance policies for all entities within the system. The responsibility and powers of both the system board and the hospital boards should be clearly delineated in

the governing documents. This includes having a governance authority matrix that lists the role, responsibility, and authority of each board and committee.

Key Takeaways

- Create standardized templates for board meeting materials, including agendas, minutes, and executive summaries.
- Utilize a common, secure board portal.
- Create an annual board calendar for the system and use that as the framework for planning subsidiary board work.
- Standardize bylaws, charters, and governance policies for all entities within the system (as much as possible).
- Develop a clear governance authority matrix and ensure all board members understand their roles and responsibilities.
- Hold system-wide orientations and all-boards continuing education sessions.
- Use the same board self-assessment tool systemwide.

Orientation and Continuing Education

Scheduling one annual board orientation session for all new board members across the system is often best if possible. This is not only an efficient use of time but will also help new directors have a better understanding of the whole organization and its governance structure. It also helps eliminate any variations in messaging that would occur if there were siloed sessions. Another added benefit is that these new members get the chance to learn together and meet, which can increase the feeling of systemness. GSPs can then pair new members with seasoned veterans from their individual boards as part of onboarding to learn more about their specific role (e.g., if they are on a subsidiary board, it will be helpful to hear details about the hospital they are overseeing and their specific governance authority and responsibilities).[3]

For continuing education, there are often topics that all boards in the system need to learn about, whether related to the overall system strategic plan or healthcare trends. Inviting all board members to attend education sessions together (either virtually or in person) ensures everyone hears the same information and supports a culture of systemness. If the sessions are in person, there is also the opportunity for board members throughout the system to build relationships and share best practices.

Having a unified approach to governance will allow for consistent processes, more efficient decision making, clear roles, easier best-practice sharing, and ultimately promote a greater sense of systemness.

3   Lauren Schantz, "Toward a More Perfect Union: How Governance Support Professionals Can Promote 'Systemness,'" Governance Notes, The Governance Institute, June 2019.

Additional Resources

For a deeper dive on this topic, view these TGI resources:
- Modernizing Governance at HSHS to Position for a New Healthcare Future (case study)
- "Governance Practices that Support Systemness" (Subsidiary Focus Article)
- "The Role of Communication in Building Systemness" (System Focus Article)
- "Toward a More Perfect Union: How Governance Support Professionals Can Promote 'Systemness'" (Governance Notes Article)
- "Meaningful Communication Is Key to Successful Health System/Local Board Governance Integration" (Subsidiary Focus Article)
- Governance Support Templates (sample charters, agendas, board calendars, governance authority matrix, and more)

Board Self-Assessments

Utilizing the same board self-assessment tools (e.g., The Governance Institute's BoardCompass®) systemwide ensures that all are evaluating board practices using similar metrics. This will make it easier to identify challenges and best practices in each entity and across the system. The results will also set the foundation for developing annual system-wide and entity-specific board development goals.[4]

By focusing on these areas, the health system's GSPs can create more consistent governance across the organization. This can drive meaningful changes in governance practices that promote a systemwide culture of unified, high-performing governance.

4   Knecht, October 2022.