

Governance Notes

Designed for governance support professionals in the healthcare industry.

Your Success Is My Success

By Linda Galindo, President, Galindo Consulting, Inc.

Setting up board members for success can be a daunting but exhilarating career focus as a governance support professional. Excelling at supporting board member success requires ensuring that board members are receiving the right information at the right time, carefully managing *your* time so critical work is accomplished before meetings, and insisting on accountability. This article digs deeper into these topics, which should be a focus for anyone in a board support role.

Provide the Right Information at the Right Time to the Board

One challenge many governance support professionals face is distilling information to the appropriate level for the board. The trick here is to define the “appropriate level” of information. That’s best accomplished by asking the board what it needs and by when. Are there some things the board always gets that are frankly never looked at? When sending items out to board members, is there clarity as to what it’s for (e.g., “for input,” “for discussion,” “for information only,” “for decision,” or “for action”)? Do you simply attach documents and send them to board members when instructed to by the CEO or board chair when you know a brief, clarifying note would be helpful?

What you *don’t* want is a board member wondering, “Why am I

Key Takeaways

- Regularly ask board members how you can better distill information in a way that meets their needs and sets them up for success.
- Set expectations at board orientation by letting new board members know the amount and types of information they are expected to review before meetings.
- When preparing for meetings, build in time for reading and distilling information for the board. Assess if you need to ask for help or take something off your plate to ensure this important work is achieved.
- Hold board members and executives accountable for getting meeting materials in on time.

getting this and why now?” Each communication needs clarification. “You are receiving this attachment to read prior to the discussion on term limits, which will be the third item on the board agenda in July.” Insist and persist on brevity and clarity. Give all communication going and coming a home. That’s accomplished by answering “Why am I getting this and why now?” and “Why am I sending this and why now?”

Communication Check-in

Continually review how and when information is disseminated to ensure effective board meetings. “You will receive your board packet links one full week before the board meeting.” Then meet the deadline every time. If anything is preventing the promised deadline from being met and you have to “rescue, fix, and save” a lot, alert the CEO and board chair so they can re-establish the need for accountability to you and the board.

Regularly engage the board in a simple poll as it pertains to the distillation and dissemination of information. Ask “What should I stop doing, start doing, and do more of?” “What is working for you and what is not working for you?” The board may ask the same of you. Be ready with a response.

With the increasing volume and complexity of information, 10 minutes of feedback along these lines once a quarter will make your support role less ubiquitous and will ensure you are effectively meeting expectations of the governance support role. Do this quick poll as an agenda item where the whole board participates. Board members can keep each other in check around long-winded lists of unreasonable expectations.

Accountability Matters

Keep an eye out for long-held, outdated practices. In a recent

example, a board member asked during a feedback session why hard copy packets were still being printed and available for board members at meetings. Board support replied, "There are still members who want hard copies, forget their packets they downloaded at home, don't want to work off of an iPad, or don't have time to go over anything until just before the meeting. I've had to be ready for all these situations, so I print packets." The board was then reminded by the chair about the agreement to go paperless and that printed documents were no longer going to be provided.

Emily met with her CEO to let him know that three of 10 board members were taking up inordinate amounts of her time leading up to quarterly meetings because they were not reading their email and asking that hard copies of documents be faxed or sent to them. The CEO explained that he had spoken to them but they were of "another generation," had essential institutional knowledge, and without term limits, were likely to be on the board several more years. Emily asked for permission to say no to their requests with a referral to him. "Days leading up to board meetings I was staying late and taking care of last-minute requests and calls so the CEO wouldn't be bothered. I was afraid he would see it as complaining or not being a competent team player. He didn't know what the impact on me was. With escalating complexity and volume of information to sort through, board meeting preparation was becoming impossible. The need for heroics to ensure a smooth board meeting were rewarded but it was unsatisfying."

Jane experienced an executive leader who chronically missed deadlines for report completion and she had

to remind, nag, or otherwise beg so she could close things out and finish board meeting preparation. She made her CEO aware of it and asked for the authority to go to completion without needed information if it was not submitted on time.

When information is unacceptably late coming in and you are staying much too long at work or doing too much "reminding" to make sure everything is included in the packet, it is time to ask for accountability to deadlines. The goal is to rarely stay late. "We all do what we say we are going to do by when we say we will do it" describes an accountable, high-performing board that demonstrates utmost respect and appreciation for the governance support role.

Ask for Help

Complexity and increased volume of information is real. If everything in the governance support role somehow gets done but you have not communicated how much more time it's taking without help, you are putting the organization at risk. "How did the last board support person get this job done?!" Most likely, she did it all herself and wouldn't delegate or communicate what was no longer a relevant activity for board support. She burned out.

If you are a control freak or fear "not being able to do it all" shows weakness, it will be difficult for you to ask for this kind of help. But the fact is, no one wants you to suffer. There is no need to be heroic and silent. The courageous thing to do is ask for help and present ideas to get the help you need.

In this age of information explosion, a divide-and-conquer approach can work. Consider enrolling board

members to take part in what can or needs to be summarized before it's sent out. Use content management software programs that allow individuals to summarize and post information to save you time wading through and distilling everything. You might be surprised how much others don't mind reading, summarizing, and presenting salient points when given clear guidelines and a process to do so. It may mean you have to give up "knowing everything" or a fear that you don't have the answer. A collaborative board will respond with support when presented with how much has changed in the "information age."

Use Technology

Most organizations have moved to online board portals. The goal of going to paperless board meetings is common. Becoming an expert on board portal software is probably the best possible use of a governance support professional's time. Once everyone has adapted to using the board portal, the governance support role can be infinitely easier.¹ The transition, however, can be especially hard on those who like their hard copies and binders.

Be Thoughtful

Create a process that builds in time to focus, read, and distill information. Too often, time that is needed to do this before board meetings is not included in the job description. Something may have to come off your plate to "do it all." Constant interruption can be a real barrier, so asking for a "protected" hour isn't unreasonable. While one protected hour a day won't always be possible, this focus is unmatched in return on investment for your productivity and effectiveness.

Setting the board up for success requires ensuring that your role is positioned for success as well.

¹ For more information on The Governance Institute's board portal, see www.governanceinstitute.com/page/Nasdaq_Boardvantage or contact your Account Manager at (877) 712-8778.

The governance support role can be straightforward when there is clear communication around what the board needs, information is provided on time, and board members are prepared. For all involved, there must be minimal exceptions for not meeting deadlines. No executive or board member should make their lack of preparation or planning a governance support professional's emergency. Everyone understands board agendas are jam-packed. High-stakes, timely decisions are needed and late or lacking information puts thoughtful decision making at risk. If the governance support role requires a significant amount of time chasing down agenda items, reports, or supporting documents needed for board preparation, call a "time out" with the CEO and board chair. Setting the board up for success requires ensuring that your role is positioned for success as well.

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