



Welcome to The Governance Institute's Governance Notes!

This newsletter provides governance support professionals with information and expert opinions in the area of hospital and health system governance and gives updates on services and events at The Governance Institute.

Solving the Board Engagement Puzzle

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Experiencing the frustration of a disconnected board can feel like struggling to complete a puzzle with missing pieces. Among the challenges of board and executive leadership is that of non-engaged board members. When board members fail to “connect,” their lack of attendance and engagement results in active board members feeling spread thin and unable to deliver timely results. Board members who fail to show up actually create a breach in their fiduciary duties—meaning they are failing to review the records and ask the questions—and could technically face personal liability if something goes wrong. Furthermore, when members are inactive it sends a bad message to the rest of the team.

Missing Pieces Equates to an Incomplete Picture

A detached governing board hinders the organization's ability to get things done. Absent members result in the loss of a quorum needed for that critical strategic vote. Members that fail to be part of the process also fail to understand roles of the board and executive team, the mission, and how programs support the larger vision. Without this knowledge, the disconnected board member loses his or her value as an ambassador in the community. The overshadowing result is a waste of time and resources, and a board lacking valuable pieces to the picture. However, missing a few pieces doesn't mean you should just scrap the puzzle and give up. It means taking what you have, identifying and finding those pieces that are missing, and continuing to work toward a finished product.

Pinpoint the Missing Pieces: What's Keeping Your Members from Participating?

The best way to strengthen the connection of your board is to be proactive in anchoring preventative engagement measures into your board structure. Ask yourself these questions *before* you lose engagement, and apply the right tactics if member connections have already begun unraveling:

- **Are expectations clearly established and enforced?** Unclear expectations will undoubtedly lead to lower engagement over time. The role of the board should not be underestimated. A strong board drives a strong organization, and concise and consistent messaging of the board's role is a first critical piece.
- **Are board members provided with a complete understanding of the organization and their role?** Provide members with the data required to make the important decisions, and continually ensure they have all the right information to get the job done.
- **Has a relationship been established between the CEO and the board?** Governance leadership results from a constructive partnership with the CEO. Research confirms a direct correlation between the amounts of time executive leadership spends on board-related activities and the rates of satisfaction with the board's performance. Executives often fail to define board activities, the rate of return, and their

direct influence on board members.¹

- **Do meetings lack purpose?** A top complaint of governance is boring meetings that lack purpose, deliver a poor agenda, fail to generate dialogue, and lead to death by PowerPoint.² At the governance level, time is measured in increments of \$300 per hour, per person. A nine-member board sitting through a two-hour meeting is evaluated at a \$5,400 investment—a calculation to reflect on when planning your next meeting.

Frame the Engagement

People often assemble a jigsaw puzzle by starting at the outside and completing the frame first. This same process applies to building a well-connected board—create the framework to guide the process. This starts with that first piece and takes shape as each additional piece is locked into place. Connecting the pieces requires strategic engagement by the organization to effectively utilize board member talents and place them in the right position within the board structure.

Talk with board members—find out what motivates them. Inquire as to why they joined the organization and how you can further engage them. Ask board members how they see themselves contributing, and what passions and talents they would like to contribute. Then, provide a variety of ways to stay engaged—not everyone is cut out to serve on a committee or host an event.

Ask the pressing questions of the organization's role in the board's experience. Sometimes you find yourself stuck in the puzzle and cannot find the right piece to move forward; pause and look again. Make sure you are asking the right questions. Are meetings productive, engaging, and stimulating strategic conversation? Are core messages communicated? Keeping board members informed of the challenges and accomplishments of the organization, and providing them with the information they need, empowers them to do their job. Finally, meet with governance leadership outside board meetings to create relationships and continual dialogue.

¹ Leslie Bonner, "How to Engage (and Retain) Your Nonprofit Board Members," BonnerSphar Consulting, April 19, 2013 (available at www.bonner-consulting.com/blog/how-to-engage-and-retain-your-nonprofit-board-members).

² Les Wallace, Ph.D., "Flip That Meeting to Improve Outcomes, Engagement, and Satisfaction," Signature Resources (available at www.signatureresources.com/about-us/flip-meeting-improve-outcomes-engagement-and-satisfaction).

Communicate expectations. Step back and look at the big picture—what do you need the board to accomplish? Take the time to create a written and intentional plan outlining organizational expectations of each board position. Design job descriptions and committee service expectations, special projects, and expected deliverables—all critical tools to utilize in recruitment, orientation, and annual reviews. Make sure that the board has the tools needed to do the job right. Provide training needed to produce quality results. A well-run, high-functioning board will engage in annual evaluations in conjunction with one-on-one conversations when needed. Communication at this level provides insight, encourages participation, and creates engagement.

Make the necessary changes. Restructure board meetings to make them meaningful, strategic, and time-efficient. Provide clear agendas and expected outcomes—go beyond reading the executive report that has already been provided in advance. People connect with action! This is what motivates critical thinking, innovative discussions, and decision making. Utilize succession planning to stimulate leadership cycles and promote longevity. Incorporate technology when possible—board portals and management software drive communication and fluid energy around projects by stimulating conversations outside the boardroom. Board members will arrive informed and ready to participate.

Ensure board members know the business of the business. Creating an effective board is not just about governance, it is about understanding the breadth and depth of strategy, issues, and challenges facing the organization. Develop a comprehensive board education plan that encompasses mission, vision, strategy, and performance goals. Offering ongoing training opportunities educates the board in all aspects of the organization, assists them in making key decisions, and provides a quality experience that generates excitement, rather than disconnection, in tackling the issues at hand.

Keep in mind that just as it takes time to assemble that challenging puzzle, so it takes time to create a fully engaged board that is well connected to the organization's executive team and strategic goals. Engage in the process together—something special happens when people connect and work together to achieve a goal. Build your frame, and then strategically link one piece at a time to complete your vision of the final product.

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