Governance Support Spotlight: Lisa L. Pascoe, FACHE, Sparrow Health System
Board Self-Assessment Results Drive System-Wide Goals

Two years ago, Sparrow Health System coordinated a board self-assessment with all of its affiliates and used the feedback to set its first set of system-wide governance goals. Lisa L. Pascoe, FACHE, Executive Director, Governance, supports the system board and Sparrow Hospital board and is part of the organization's executive management team. She has played a large role in working with leadership to bring these goals to life, starting with improving systemness through better communication, standardizing governance, and creating a consistent education curriculum.

Leadership Comes Together to Improve System Communication

Sparrow Health System is a non-profit comprehensive health system in Lansing, Michigan. It has two main campuses, one with a level one trauma center, in Lansing; affiliate hospitals in St. Johns, Carson City, and Ionia; a long-term acute care hospital; dozens of satellite care centers and physician offices; a health maintenance organization (Physicians Health Plan of Mid-Michigan); a preferred provider organization (Sparrow Physicians Health Plan); a foundation; a home health agency; retail pharmacies; and a health science pavilion, including an athletic club. A 15-member system board governs the entire corporation, but many of the affiliated hospitals and organizations also have their own boards. In past years, many of these boards had done a self-assessment, but it wasn't a coordinated effort. In 2013, Pascoe worked with The Governance Institute to organize the board self-assessment so that everyone took it during the same year, and the results were distributed to each organization as well as combined into a full system report.

"Each organization looked at its own scores and created affiliate-specific goals based on their results, and at a system level we focused on top-box scores that were low across all of the organizations to create system-wide goals," Pascoe said. "Two such areas we needed to improve involved the questions around 'communicating clearly with other boards and entities within the organization' and 'understanding the board's role relative to other boards and entities within the organization.'" The system also saw that improvements were needed in coordinating board development and governance procedures in order to better align its boards.

The system created a Board Leadership Network to enhance communication and cross-entity interaction. This network consists of board chairs, vice chairs, and executive liaisons from across the system. The group is also planning to add a key physician leader from each organization to this mix. The Board Leadership Network started meeting quarterly at the end of 2014 and rotates the meeting location in order to showcase each entity and learn more about their operations.

The goal of the Board Leadership Network is to improve alignment, communication, and connectedness of governance. It has created a space for leaders throughout the system to have regular dialogue about timely issues. Discussions at the meetings have included everything from system-wide governance goal setting to coordinating continuing education to physicians in governance.

"We have had three meetings so far, and while it is still fairly new, the response has been overwhelmingly positive," Pascoe said. "The attendance has been terrific and we are beginning to expand this model to other areas for better coordination across the system." They plan to set up a Sparrow Way Action Committee to implement and track adherence to key quality initiatives using this model. This group will also have members from each affiliate, and will work together to look at the system's quality goals, how these goals are being measured, and ways to gain synergies across the organization in quality improvement efforts.

Standardizing Governance and Board Education

A major initiative that came out of the board self-assessment and Board Leadership Network meetings was the need to create a coordinated curriculum for board education. Pascoe took the lead on this project and worked with leadership to create a curriculum for 2015 and roll it out to all boards throughout the system. "We knew we needed to be better about all being on the same page as far as what is going on in healthcare and what is going on in our own organization, as well as what things are important as we are planning strategically for the future," Pascoe said.

To create the curriculum, she began by meeting with the system board's governance effectiveness committee to come up with key education themes. The topics that came out of that meeting were then brought to the Board Leadership Network for discussion to make sure that they resonated with everyone and would be appropriate system-wide. From those meetings, four education themes were developed for the year:

- Population health
- Teamwork
- Research and innovation
- Governance refreshers

Pascoe then put together educational materials and events for board members based on that curriculum and a plan for covering the topics throughout the year. For example, to cover research and innovation, she brought in the Director of the Center of Innovation at Mayo Clinic to speak on the topic at a system-wide governance and leadership education session, and Sparrow leaders, including board members, were invited to visit Mayo to see the innovative things that are happening on-site.

She also created some basic guidelines, such as having boards agree to set aside time on each meeting agenda for education and working with support staff to ensure that educational materials are always included in board packets. "It's important that board members are getting the education they need. Healthcare keeps moving faster and faster and getting more complicated and these are volunteers we are asking to keep up with this," Pascoe said. "We are asking them to digest a huge amount of information and make really pivotal decisions very quickly, so we have to get them the right information, helping them feel comfortable making these decisions on short timeframes."

The curriculum includes more than just basic education. Pascoe helped develop a system-wide mentoring program, clinical observation opportunities, and a board member exchange program. Many board members don't have a clinical background, so she set up the clinical observation trial program to provide board members with the opportunity to go out into the organization in an organized way and look at how things operate clinically. The board member exchange program also helps them get exposure by providing a simple way for board members to request to attend other board meetings and visit other organizations throughout the system. In addition, she coordinates an education event every year where she brings in an outside speaker and invites all of the board members.

"Finding all of these different ways for board members to gain education and information in an organized, thoughtful way has been a huge focus for me this year," Pascoe said. "The board exchange program has begun to take off, with a few members taking advantage of visiting other boards. The clinical observation program was just implemented in April and is currently in a trial phase at our system board, but we have had several clinical areas respond very positively and request that they be promoted to board members for visits."

In order to create systemness, Sparrow Health System has been working to standardize other aspects of governance as well. Pascoe developed standards at the corporate level to set direction and make sure governance is more consistent throughout the system. This includes creating standardized governance policies and procedures, bylaws, and meeting materials. She also develops and coordinates system-wide board orientation, and has created a common set of expectations for onboarding new members.

"We are trying to go for standardization and consistency as much as we can while still respecting our boards' autonomy," she said. "Some of our board members end up serving on other Sparrow boards, so now when people get into governance things don't look or feel as different across the system."

Sparrow Health System has many other projects in the works such as focusing on improving succession planning, clarifying board authority levels, and expanding its board portal throughout the system. The system is also still looking to build new partnerships and Pascoe will be facilitating any governance restructuring necessary as a result of affiliations, acquisitions, and/or mergers that occur, including redesigning board reporting structures, bylaws and policy modifications, and changes in board structure or membership. "We still have lots of room for improvement," Pascoe said. "We will be conducting another system-wide assessment this year in Q3, so it will be interesting to see if we have made measurable improvements and what new opportunities are identified."

The Governance Institute thanks Lisa L. Pascoe, FACHE, for taking the time to be interviewed for this article and sharing her organization's current governance efforts.

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