

Leading with Love: Five Strategies to Engage Your Rural Hospital Board Members

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I tell our senior leaders that we have 12 Super Bowls every year. These big moments are when we get together to have our monthly hospital board meetings, and I want each one to be special and impactful for everyone involved.

Board members want to make valuable contributions to the organizations and communities they serve, and rural hospital CEOs want their board members to be engaged. What is important to board members, and how do we, as executives, show them the love they deserve?

I came up with a novel idea: ask them.

I surveyed the 11 board members from the independent, rural health system I serve and received input from six. I did not finish at the top of my class in my doctoral program statistics class, but I'm going with the basis that a 54 percent response rate is solid. I asked four questions:

1. Think of a time when you felt fully engaged as a hospital board member. Describe in vivid detail what was going on at the time. What was it about that moment?
2. When thinking of our board meeting agenda, do certain items catch your attention? Describe one or more categories you find interesting and why.
3. Is there anything about your board work that is a de-energizer for you? Do certain topics leave you feeling less engaged?
4. What could I do to increase your feeling of engagement and accomplishments as a hospital board member?

The answers funneled towards five themes that may help to lead your board members with love.

Make Sure All Voices Are Heard

Break into small groups and tackle a complicated topic. Ask the question from a curious perspective. Have each group select a spokesperson and reconvene with the full board to share key takeaways. Small groups offer some of our quieter members the opportunity to express their opinions in a safe manner.

Connect Board Members with Employees

Any chance to connect board members with those closest to our patients is a win. Invite them to serve lunch at Hospital Week and bring board members in as participants in staff retirements and other celebrations. Ask key hospital personnel to present information at board meetings and allow board members to ask questions and express gratitude for their work. This practice represents a growth opportunity for the employee as well. Board education has a role in many of our board meetings. Bring internal talent onto this stage.

→ Key Board Takeaways

To help drive board member engagement:

- Make sure each board member's voice is heard. The board chair should engage with those not speaking up. It can also be helpful to break into small groups for discussions to ensure everyone is contributing and feels comfortable sharing their opinions.
- Connect board members to employees. Ensure board members are regularly interacting with staff so that they hear from those closest to the patient.
- Connect board members with each other. Provide opportunities for board members to get to know one another better and build relationships.
- Pay attention to heart vs. head agenda items. Balance out these topics so meetings are not too heavy one way or the other.
- Always close the loop on key issues. After making big decisions, it is important for the board to know how things are progressing and to always be kept in the loop.
- Most importantly, ask board members how to help foster their engagement and ensure they are finding meaning in their role.

Connect Board Members with Each Other

Our board meetings finish with a roundtable chance for each member to share something personal or professional. We call this segment “Inquiring Minds.” New grandchildren, job accomplishments, patient stories, and times when something they learned at a hospital board meeting was operationalized in their own business have all been topics of conversation. This process takes less than 10 minutes and helps to personalize the experience while building community.

Balance Out Heart versus Head Agenda Items

Some of us are numbers people, while some of us thrive on emotion. Find a balance during board meetings to connect with both kinds of board members. If the meeting needs to be finance-heavy, find a way to weave in an appreciative inquiry moment, inviting board members to dream about the organization’s future. If a portion of the meeting needs to address hospital billing issues, balance the topic by asking members what it might feel like to have a near-perfect billing experience with hospital and physician services.

Find a Way to Close the Loop on Key Issues

Here’s a quote from the survey that caught my attention: “The board hears a lot about strategic partnerships when we are considering the opportunity or first entering into them, but we hear little about how those partnerships are progressing until there is an issue that causes us to exit the strategy. We often invest a substantial amount of money in infrastructure to accommodate a partnership, and it would be beneficial to know how successful these initiatives are periodically.”

When the board makes a key decision, create a placeholder three months or six months away that provides the board with an update on how that decision is progressing. Good or bad, close the loop, reevaluate the decision, and learn from the process.

Closing Thoughts

A high level of engagement between hospital board members and senior leadership contributes to organizational success. Positive engagement is wonderful when things are going well, and our health systems are firing on all cylinders. I suggest

engagement is even more important in challenging times when CEOs need support, advice, and love from the board members they are blessed to serve.

One recent example of high board engagement happened during the COVID pandemic. Financial performance was struggling, and our members told us to take care of our patients and employees and worry about the dollars later. This engagement refocused my attention to where it should be and gave me space to resolve the financial issues when the time was right.

Building positive connections with our hospital board members has proven to be one of the most rewarding aspects of my career. Try one or more of these suggestions and let me know if and how the change impacts the meetings with this most important constituency group.

The Governance Institute thanks David L. Schreiner, FACHE, President and CEO, Katherine Shaw Bethea Hospital, for contributing this article. He can be reached at dschreiner@ksbhospital.com.

