



Meaningful Communication Is Key to Successful Health System/Local Board Governance Integration

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By now, most health system boards are well-versed in the principles of good healthcare governance. Many have implemented governance best practices such as annual board and committee evaluations, robust director orientation and training programs, and intentional efforts to recruit a more diverse, competency-based board of directors.

Some system boards have even undergone the demanding work of revamping their board functions and governance structure, ensuring the board's work and the committee structure are carefully aligned with the ongoing refresh of the system's strategic direction. But only a **few** system boards have successfully brought their local boards along on the good governance journey.

A system board may claim it has engaged its regional/community/local hospital boards, but we often hear otherwise from the local board members and system leadership. One health system CEO described it to us this way, "We have 10 different local boards with 10 different ways of governing."

Here is a short quiz you can use to determine whether your system board governance is aligned with your local board governance. Ask local hospital leaders and board members the following:

- What is ABC Health System's mission?
- What is the unique and specific role of the ABC Health System local boards (i.e., what are the local boards responsible for)?
- What are the steps in ABC Health System's strategic planning process?
- What are ABC Health System's top three strategic priorities for the coming year?
- What is the communication protocol between your local board and the system board?
- What process or structure does ABC Health System have to share best practices amongst the local boards on a regular basis?

If the responses differ from local board to local board, it is time to invest in developing your local boards to better align with the system board's principles and practices of good governance.

Without a thoughtful plan to inculcate good governance throughout the system, it is only a matter of time before you might experience a culture of "us vs. them," or have local board members who are unengaged or unsure of their role. High-performing health systems invest not only in themselves but also in local governance. These systems allocate resources to help strengthen their local board governance and individual board members.

Recommendations

Aligning and integrating your system and local boards around governance is often a multi-year process and may feel daunting at first. The key to successful integration, based on our experience, is when we question everything as a matter of **meaningful communication**: a process of actively listening (input) with the desire to understand different perspectives (thruput) and provide clear message points or information (output). Putting this framework into practice, we offer some sample questions and corresponding suggestions:

How do we improve communication and create a shared culture between the system and among the local boards?

- **Conduct an annual road trip** or a listening tour to each local hospital board, giving local board members an opportunity to share questions, concerns, and insights. If possible, have the system board chair and CEO or COO participate in the road trips.
- **Conduct an annual all-boards summit** that brings the system and local boards together. This is a forum where everyone receives the same message simultaneously (e.g., strategy updates and the sound bites on the top three strategic priorities for the coming year), and board members from all boards have an opportunity to meet and learn from one another under the umbrella of the full system.
- **Create a communication protocol and cadence.** In the same way that corporations have quarterly calls with investors and analysts, use virtual meetings to connect the system and local boards on a routine basis for specific updates, to celebrate wins, and share best practices.

How do we communicate the same information to every new director who joins a local board?

- **Develop a comprehensive and consistent governance orientation program** for all new board members. Allow for customization of local-board level information.
- If possible, **appoint a governance liaison to be the consistent point of contact** for all local board leaders and CEOs. This person should have direct access to the system CEO, board chair, and others who set governance policy for the system.

How do we create consistency in communication and governance practice up and down the system?

- **Develop meeting agenda templates, dashboards, assessment tools, skills matrix templates,** and other governance-related documents for the local boards to use.
- **Conduct board chair training** for all local board leadership on how to facilitate effective board meetings. Emphasize the board chair's responsibility for setting the tone of the meeting; keeping conversations on topic and at the governance level ("noses in, fingers out"); keeping the mission, vision, and strategy at the forefront of board decisions and discussions; ensuring the ask of the board is clear in each meeting; building the agenda to allow for 70 percent discussion, 30 percent presentation; creating a culture of respect between the board and management; and eliciting participation from all board members.
- **Conduct a governance support training** for all staff members who support local boards. Consider standardizing and training them on how to communicate to

→ Key Questions for the System Board

- How well do you know who is serving on your local boards? What is the process of getting to know the local board members when they join?
- How confident are you about recruiting from the local boards to fill a seat on your system board? Are you training the next generation of leaders?
- Which governance best practices have the local boards implemented to create cultural and best practice alignment between the system and the local boards?
- What is the communication protocol between the local board and the system board?
- Are board members clear about difference in the decision-making authority of the system board in relationship to the local boards?

board members, capture meeting minutes, update board rosters, track term cliffs, etc.

- **Define terms and acronyms used throughout the system.** For example, clarify what you mean by “strategic-level,” ensuring everyone has a shared understanding of what is and is not considered strategic.

We know several health systems that recognized early on the importance of bringing their local boards on the same journey as the system board to good governance. They have implemented many of these practices and are seeing valuable results. The system board chair can further support alignment efforts by building regular updates and touchpoints into the board agenda and calendar, respectively.

When meaningful communication becomes a core operating value, relationships between the system and local boards strengthen. Board members row in the same direction toward a shared vision, speak the same language, and serve the mission in a consistent way. They realize what it means to be part of a unified system and experience a culture of “us.” In turn, this allows board members to better serve and advocate for the patients, employees, and communities they represent.

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