



Learning and Working Together to Solve Today's Complex Challenges

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Non-profit healthcare organizations benefit greatly from governance that brings to the boardroom table a broad range of expertise—from both inside and outside healthcare. It's vital that board members and organization leaders spend time together at the start of the year educating themselves and aligning their thinking.

For a number of years, Community Health Network executive leaders and the organization's board have attended—together as a group—the winter leadership conference organized by The Governance Institute. This tradition of gathering early in the year has been invaluable in ensuring all are on the same page, strengthening relationships internally and externally, experiencing new learning together, and validating current thinking.

The value of this kind of retreat begins with shared education. Healthcare is a sector facing constant change, even when not challenged by a pandemic. Technologies advance, payment models evolve, retail concepts emerge, cyberthreats multiply, consumerism and patient experience grow in importance, labor markets become increasingly complicated, and new regulations demand attention.

It's helpful for leaders and board members to hear current insights on healthcare topics and trends—simultaneously, in the same room. Sometimes educational topics spark new thinking, and other times they serve to validate the present course, which adds to board members' comfort level with organizational direction and the approaches advocated by executive leadership.

The shared experience gives board members a better ability to see issues through the same lens as leadership. Board members gain a greater understanding of issues that executive leaders bring to subsequent board meetings and are better able to ask in-depth questions to inform their decision making.

→ Key Board Takeaways

- Gather the board and senior leadership together early in the year for education opportunities to help get everyone on the same page, strengthen relationships, and experience new learning together.
- Hearing current insights on healthcare topics and trends together at the same time can help spark new thinking, serve to validate the board's/organization's present course, and help stakeholders see issues through the same lens.
- An early-year education-focused retreat is also an ideal time to conduct a strategy-oriented board meeting, to develop and adjust the strategic plan and mission-focused priorities.
- An organization can work through challenges more successfully when there are strong relationships between the board and executive leadership.

One recent gathering featured discussion of the benefit of partnerships in healthcare, which was valuable food for thought for community leaders and board members. Building partnerships is an element of the organization's strategic plan, a recognition that many challenges in healthcare are most effectively addressed in collaboration with others.

Gathering for shared education is also beneficial for helping board members whose primary expertise is outside of healthcare to increase their industry knowledge—such education is especially important as a part of onboarding new board members from outside of healthcare. An educational retreat can also help board members to gain new insights into board governance topics and practices.

The early-year retreat is also an ideal time to conduct a strategy-oriented board meeting. Leaders and board members who are aligned are better able to work together developing and adjusting strategic plans that serve the organization's mission and priorities. Conducting this gathering as part of a governance conference has the added benefit of creating connections with leaders and board members from other healthcare organizations, enabling helpful benchmarking and idea-sharing.

Ultimately, the most important benefit of a summit that gathers board members and executive leaders is relationship-building and a greater understanding of varying perspectives. The business of healthcare is complex and demanding, filled with tough

topics and marked by difficult decisions that in many cases must be made increasingly quickly.

An organization can work through these challenges more successfully when there are strong relationships between the board and the executive leadership team. The ultimate aim of an early-year retreat is that all parties will head home with deeper insights and greater trust—and an assurance that all are rowing in the same direction, ready to work together tackling the challenges of healthcare.

The Governance Institute thanks Kyle Fisher, Executive Vice President and Chief Financial Officer, Community Health Network, for contributing this article. He can be reached at kfisher@community.com.

