

Building Teamwork and a Positive Culture for Governance Support Staff throughout Corewell Health

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In large, complex organizations, especially those created through a series of integrations as Corewell Health was, multiple governance support staff (we use the term “liaisons”) support various boards and committees—and each has their own way of doing the governance work. As Corewell Health moved toward a single health system with unified governance practices and standards, it has been invaluable to create a team of the many liaisons who were previously on an island alone.

Bringing Governance Support Staff Together

As our health system moved from a “federation” to an operating company model, we sought to leverage the governance knowledge of all of our professionals (collectively with well over 100 years of experience) by bringing them together to create a “governance team.” Each of these liaisons works in different parts of the organization, but all interface with one another, share best practices, and create standard work used throughout the organization.

We started the dialogue by bringing a group of our hospital liaisons together four years ago for quarterly lunch education and sharing sessions (sharing of best practices as well as asking for assistance with technology hurdles and other governance challenges). Over salads and sandwiches, we built rapport, earned each other’s trust, and jointly worked to solve various governance issues. This became a forum for communication where none formally existed. After a year or so, that group expanded from the hospital liaisons to all liaisons across the organization and, while it became a bit more complex by including other business lines, the number of practical solutions created and best practices shared far outweighed the complexity of the discussions.

Through this forum, we built a team of governance liaisons from a disparate group of individual contributors. Our initial meetings lasted 1.5 hours with 30 minutes of lunch and conversations, 30 minutes of education, and 30 minutes of questions/answers

and problem sharing/solving. Everyone at the table had a voice and was expected to contribute; the only ground rules were to be curious and open to new ideas and that we would leave the meeting with clarity about organizational directives, initiatives, etc. and how they would impact governance (or vice versa!). At first, the conversations were simple: “I have this challenge” or “this is how I solve that.” But after a few sessions, the conversations evolved to be “what if we tried this,” “I think doing this would be more efficient,” and “I know this is done at X health system and is highly effective.” Our little lunch group transformed into a governance town hall. Work friends brought work friends who also supported governance activities and it ballooned to a connection point and support system for 40-plus individuals in our organization. The liaisons began requesting information, materials, and standard work, identifying areas that needed improved processes.

→ Key Takeaways for Governance Support Staff

As governance support staff work to build teamwork and a positive culture at their own organizations, they should:

- Create a culture where each team member’s job, ideas, and perspective are valued. Suggestions and solutions can and should come from everyone.
- Be curious (ask tough questions), open (explore new ideas), and available/present (ready to collaborate and work together).
- Have a positive attitude.
- Ensure communication is robust—you cannot overcommunicate.
- Have training and onboarding for governance support staff that explains their role and responsibilities, as well as the importance of working with others across the system to improve governance.

The Result: A Team Working towards the Same Goal

Our goal all along has been to create community and a support system for governance professionals. With formal education, expectations, and most importantly, others who understand the job (and the tremendous amount of pressure that comes with the role), new liaisons get more training and onboarding than those in the past. They have a body of standards to rely on as opposed to creating something themselves. Some of the original underpinnings still resonate in that we will often come up with an idea, pilot it, and then revisit what needs to be altered

in order to make it even more effective. We have created a network of support and camaraderie. All are on the same team, working toward a common goal.

During the early COVID years, we collaborated on the problem-solving that was required for virtual meetings, a virtual office, and other remote governance work conundrums we never could have fathomed before then.

The structure has changed to drop-in sessions for all liaisons and monthly meetings with the advisors (the governance support to the main boards) who then share the standard work with the liaisons in their regions. The advisors have their own sessions with liaisons for their regions to discuss region-specific issues and coalesce around specific approaches. Participation is still voluntary and everyone has a voice—the more difficult the question posed, the better. We all leave meetings learning something and implementing a new idea or practice. We are all committed to continual improvement.

Our governance team members have developed materials to help onboard new liaisons to their roles and many of the seasoned professionals lean in to their less-experienced colleagues and provide wisdom and help them learn tips as well as grace under intense pressure. In addition to informal mentoring, we have a formal orientation and mentoring process for new liaisons. Another benefit is that with standard expectations, liaisons can support each other when they are out of office.

Transparent and consistent two-way communication is critical to allow the governance team to function at the highest level. In addition to the regularly scheduled communications, we have a culture that encourages any and every liaison to ideate and collaborate, and to share solutions with the governance team at any time. This includes asking questions and pointing out any lack of clarity or inconsistency in what they are hearing. By creating one governance team with one goal, we have adopted efficiencies that make all of us work smarter, together.

The Governance Institute thanks Steffany J. Dunker, Managing Counsel, Corewell Health, for contributing this article. She can be reached at steffany.dunker@spectrumhealth.org.

