



# CEO FOCUS

A newsletter by and for Governance Institute member CEOs

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## Govern Like a Golf Caddy

By Kreg Gruber, CEO, *Beacon Health System*

Several years ago, I was having a conversation with one of our system board members, Tom Cassidy, about what it took to be a great board member. Tom, who always has a quick wit coupled with a thoughtful approach, immediately responded, “They need to be like a great golf caddy.” Of course, the surprised look on my face and my expression of “what?!” is probably what most of you are thinking.

Tom went on to talk about his grandfather and how he was involved in community service. He was encouraging a then, very much younger Tom, to get involved. And his advice is translated below, along with some best practice insights from The Governance Institute to help my fellow CEOs in their efforts to transform their board members into golf caddies!

**First, show up!** The best caddies are waiting on you, even before the first hole. They are there and ready to go. You can’t caddy if you aren’t there. The best board members show up. They make the commitment to be at every meeting and are rarely, if ever, missing. Healthcare is so complex and changing at such a quick pace. Showing up matters. You can’t be a great board member if you aren’t there.

**Second, keep up!** The best caddies are concerned about the pace of play, making sure to prod their golfer along and keep in sync with what is going on. Great board members keep up by staying abreast of what is going on in healthcare. They read their materials in advance. And they prod leadership to make good strategic decisions in a timely manner.

Being a  
great board  
member is a  
lot like being  
a great golf  
caddy.

**Finally, speak up!** The best caddies talk to their golfer, giving their perspective about the course: the hole, the hazards, the best placements. The best board members actively participate in meetings by speaking up. Sharing their counsel, wisdom, and thoughts on where the health system needs to go. They become a partner in the dialogue with leadership and are trusted advisors.

This analogy that Tom shared, through the wisdom of his grandfather, has been one of the best descriptors of what it takes to be a great board member—and we use it often.

## CEO Takeaways

As board members are stewards to their non-profit hospital or health system, golf caddies are stewards to their golfers. Golf caddies use empathy also—they are focusing on the needs of their golfer, looking at the course through the other person's perspective, strengths, and weaknesses. The board–CEO relationship is a very special one that is important to get right. CEOs should ask themselves what they need from their board, and are those needs being fulfilled? The following are some ideas and questions for fellow CEOs to bring to their boards for discussion to help strengthen this relationship:

- **Show up:** Being at every meeting means more than just attendance. It also means coming prepared, reading the board book ahead of time, and armed with strategic-level questions and ideas that have the potential to help the CEO and senior leadership accelerate progress while maintaining a strong focus on the mission.

Questions to consider:

- » Are the board books the right length, with the right level of information? Do board members understand ahead of time what information, expertise, questions to be answered, etc. the management team needs from the board?
  - » What are some ways to help increase engagement among board members who are less engaged during board meetings or who don't come well prepared for strategic discussions?
- **Keep up; speak up:** The importance of board education in today's healthcare environment cannot be understated. The Governance Institute's members have voiced this need loud and clear since the pandemic. Beyond having the knowledge needed to make informed decisions (fulfilling the duty of care), an educated board is more likely to be more engaged, have an open and transparent culture, and maintain a healthy, trusting relationship with the chief executive and senior leadership team through understanding and respecting the line between management and governance.

Questions to consider:

- » Are your board members keeping up on industry trends, information geared towards the role of the board, and relevant educational opportunities?
- » What are some ways you can help your board strengthen its ability to “keep up” and “speak up” via ongoing education planning, building an open and candid board culture, and enhance the trust that helps define the management/governance line for you and your board?

*The Governance Institute thanks Kreg Gruber, CEO, and Tom Cassidy, board member, Beacon Health System, for contributing this article. They can be reached at [kgruber@beaconhealthsystem.org](mailto:kgruber@beaconhealthsystem.org) and [tom.cassadyjr@thehortongroup.com](mailto:tom.cassadyjr@thehortongroup.com).*

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