Governance Notes

Building a Trusting Relationship between Governance Support Professionals and the Board

The relationship between governance support professionals and board members is fundamental to good governance. A strong, collaborative relationship allows board support professionals to work effectively with each board member to ensure they are clear on their duties, prepared for upcoming meetings, equipped to make informed decisions, and have the time to focus on strategic issues. All of this can have a direct impact on the board's ability to fulfill its responsibilities and successfully lead the organization. This article provides practical tips to help governance support teams build a transparent, trusting relationship with the board.

Start from the Beginning

Governance support professionals often serve as the primary contact for the orientation of new board members. During this early introduction to the organization's governance, the support team or person has the opportunity to make a positive first impression and gain the trust of board members by providing them with an easy-to-navigate orientation to the organization.

In addition to introducing board members to the organization and their fiduciary duties and responsibilities, the governance support team can go above and beyond by being available for any questions that arise, connecting them with senior leaders and other key staff members, finding the most compatible board mentor, and training them on any governance tools, such as the board portal. Being proactive about new board members' needs shows that you value their time and will be there to provide any support necessary as they work to get up to speed. This sets the stage for how they will interact with you post-orientation.

Maintain Consistent, Open Communication

Open communication is the foundation of a trusting relationship. This begins with the governance support team being available to help the board through any governance questions or challenges. Encourage board members to contact you and/or your team and ensure they are aware of the times you are generally available and the best way to reach you (i.e., work phone, email, or cell phone).

There should always be an open flow of communication between the board and governance support. Communication may be heavier at times, such as before a board or committee meeting, during a self-assessment process, or before an education session, but in between these busy times is the chance to check in on board members, provide follow-up on action items from meetings, notify them of important deadlines or meetings, gather feedback, or even have one-on-one communication with the chair of committee leads.

Some ideas for fostering communication with the board include:

- **Encourage questions and open communication.** Create an environment where board members are comfortable coming to you when they need clarification, have questions, or want to share thoughts or ideas.
- **Leverage the board portal.** Utilize your board portal's communication and collaboration features to facilitate ongoing communication outside of meetings. Board portals can also be used to improve communication through setting automated meeting reminders; creating, assigning, and tracking action items; and providing a secure place to send meeting materials and important documents and house educational resources.
- **Respond with care and detail.** When addressing questions or feedback, respond promptly and thoughtfully. Take the time to provide a thorough response that fully answers the questions or gets to the bottom of the issue.
- **Be transparent.** Communicate any challenges or issues that arise (and if possible, some ideas for solutions) and provide honest input and feedback. Being transparent is foundational to building trust.
- **Adjust communication based on personalized preferences.** Not all board members have the same communication styles and preferences. Be in tune with this and adjust communication as necessary.
- **Seek feedback.** The only way to know for sure if the board–governance support relationship is meeting expectations is to ask. Whether it is through a board survey or personal communication, regularly check in with board members to receive feedback on governance processes and communication and always be open to making changes.

"Demonstrating your competence is key. I think you earn trustees' trust by operating at a high level and demonstrating your own critical thinking, so they feel comfortable you can exercise independent judgement. This also helps save trustees time if they trust you to make certain decisions without needing to have them review everything."

—*Amelia Gulkis, Network Board Administrator, The University of Vermont Health Network*

Getting to know board members face-to-face can also strengthen the relationship. Although the governance support team may be busy coordinating and setting up before an in-person meeting or retreat, try to make time to have casual conversations with board members. Attending a group meal or activity is also another avenue for relationship-building. Learning more about each board member informally—their interests, personality, skills, and profession—will help support professionals understand them individually and build rapport, which will make for smoother communication.

Hold the Governance Support Role to a High Standard

One of the best ways to earn the board's trust is to execute the governance support role well. This includes:

- **Compile and distribute high-quality board packets in a timely manner.** The Governance Institute suggests sending meeting materials out at least a week in advance so there is enough time for board members to review. It is important that board members are aware of what will be covered in the meeting so they can prepare accordingly.
- **Help ensure that meetings run efficiently.** Governance support professionals can assist the chair in managing the flow of meetings by being the timekeeper, making sure conversations stay on topic and that there is enough time for key agenda items, helping engage board members in discussion, and providing additional information or clarification on the spot. If meetings have a virtual option, support professionals should be available to ensure everyone can connect and effectively participate.
- **Take clear, accurate meeting minutes.** Meeting minutes provide evidence of what took place at the meeting, so it is critical to carefully capture key boardroom discussions, actions, and decisions. It can be helpful to review these with the chair post-meeting to ensure everything is complete and accurate before sending on to the board.

- **Provide necessary follow-up after meetings.** The governance support team will want to track action items throughout meetings and then follow up with board members or senior leadership to ensure these items are always addressed.
- **Be available for additional requests or to address concerns.** Board members should have faith that the support team will get them what they need to fulfill their responsibilities and be willing to work together to solve problems that may arise.
- **Stay educated.** Increase your and your team's credibility while better supporting the board by staying informed about healthcare trends, regulations, and governance best practices.

By performing at a high level, board members will gain confidence in the governance support function. This may take time, but once this trust is built it elevates the relationship and often improves governance as well.

"To alleviate the time commitment for board members and enhance communication, it is important to ensure that materials are concise and well-organized. Providence utilizes Nasdaq Boardvantage portal for managing meetings, sharing documents, and collaborating. Additionally, we focus on scheduling meetings effectively and crafting agendas that highlight critical issues. As a best practice, we distribute these materials a week prior to meetings, allowing board members ample time to prepare thoroughly."
—*Jody Younker, Former Senior Manager, Community Governance, Providence*

Reduce the Time Burden

Being a board member can be a major time commitment for these already-busy professionals. Governance support professionals can free up board members' time, so that they can focus on advancing strategy and the organization's mission.

Ideas for alleviating the time commitment include:
- Handle all scheduling for any board member travel.
- Ensure that meeting materials are concise, well-organized, and sent out with plenty of time to review.
- Make meeting materials and board documents easy to access (e.g., through a board portal).
- If you meet six or more times per year, consider moving to longer, quarterly meetings.
- Strategically plan education for board members around meeting times so it is convenient (not a separate event on a different day).

- Work with each board member's communication style to ensure they can respond in a way that's the most natural and least burdensome for them.
- When board members have questions or need additional details, do the leg work. For example, this could include pulling the information yourself, obtaining the answers from others, or even connecting them with someone from management who can help.
- Sift through information to ensure you are sharing only what is necessary, not just "nice to haves" or extra detail.

Board members have a lot to manage and are often volunteers. By being protective of board members' time, the governance support team can enable the board to focus its efforts on what matters most: governing the organization. This in turn will lead to an even stronger relationship between governance support staff and the board.

TGI thanks the Governance Support Editorial Board for sharing their thoughts and insights around building a solid relationship with the board for this article.