

# Governance Notes

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## Repositioning Board Evaluation as a Well-Being Strategy

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**The primary objective of board evaluation** is to assess performance in fulfilling fiduciary duties and other roles and responsibilities against predetermined criteria to illuminate opportunities for improvement. This can be achieved using quantitative and qualitative indicators, as well as appropriate benchmarks to drive continuous improvement and alignment with organizational goals. However, there is an opportunity to take a more expansive view of board evaluation to reposition it as a board well-being strategy.

Well-being is about achieving a holistic state of optimal functioning and satisfaction. While there are now frequent conversations about how well-being applies to advancing a broader view of physical, mental, and emotional health, there is also an opportunity to consider well-being when it comes to achieving a more whole and well-rounded state of alignment, impact, and purpose in the boardroom. Taking a more holistic approach to healthcare governing board management requires considering how to integrate more expansive tools to evaluate individual and collective board performance. It also entails three core commitments: consistency of application, a bi-directional approach, and a more expansive view of what comprises performance.

### Hardwire Consistency

Board evaluation supports the growth, development, and effectiveness of individual board members and of the board as a whole. Therefore, it should be woven through the organization as an ongoing effort to support continuous improvement. This means harnessing the power of board evaluation starts in a very simple place: consistency.

Board evaluation should be a routine, objective element of board maintenance to support performance improvement, promote accountability, and illuminate opportunities for redirection or refinement. The Governance Institute recommends using the results from a formal board self-assessment process to establish board performance improvement goals at least every two years.

Too often, board evaluation is only used when things are not going well. So, evaluation becomes negatively perceived as a lever to advance organizational agendas or to weaponize reproach rather than to objectively assess performance and drive improvement. When evaluations become seen as a reaction to address “bad behavior” or to convey disappointment, it erodes trust and diminishes the effectiveness of the activity. That’s why it’s essential to hardwire board evaluation as a routine method for supporting board well-being, refinement, and elevation that occurs on a consistent cadence and with a clearly defined set of objectives—similar to having an annual wellness visit with a medical provider to maintain your personal health. This not only fosters trust in the process and intentions amongst board members but also positions evaluation to foster accountability by shining an objective light on performance and to identify specific, actionable, and measurable opportunities for improvement. Ensuring the board is aligned around this common understanding of evaluation as a positive and constructive exercise can create engagement and support for a productive evaluation process.

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## Look Both Ways

The holistic board survey is bi-directional: it not only assesses the quality of the board’s outputs to advance the roles and responsibilities in service to the healthcare organization’s mission but also evaluates the quality of the board experience from the board member’s perspective. Board members often say they do not feel motivated or compelled to provide their best effort to the board because they have not been given a job worth doing or have not been given the information, infrastructure, or tools to do it well. Board evaluation should ensure the organization fulfills its end of the social contract by gauging board experience in terms of issues like:

- Are board roles and expectations commensurate with the competencies, experience, and stature of those around the board table?
- Are board meetings high in quality, including having clear agendas, achieving objectives, and practicing appropriate and respectful time management?
- Is communication with board members timely, relevant, effective, and delivered through appropriate methods?
- Do members have timely access to the right information, at the right level of detail, in an understandable format to support informed decision making?

- Do board onboarding, training, and development resources provide the context, information, and tools to support success?

Securing this type of information allows organizational leaders and board support professionals to ensure board leaders are being asked to do board-level work and to strengthen the infrastructure that surrounds the board experience.

## Discussion Questions for Boards and Governance Support Professionals

1. How can we reframe our approach to board evaluation to be a proactive and holistic exercise to drive continuous improvement, refinement, and acceleration?
2. What are the benefits of repositioning board evaluation as a tool to support overall board well-being rather than just performance against objectives?
3. How can we ensure our board evaluation is bi-directional and assesses both the board's efforts to advance the organization's mission and the organization's efforts to support an effective board ecosystem and experience?
4. How could expanding board evaluation beyond traditional metrics to include relational and emotional dimensions of board performance strengthen the board's resilience and ability to navigate challenges?
5. How can we collaborate to strengthen our board's relational "soft skills" to elevate trust, cohesion, and collaboration—and could that ultimately affect decision making and drive organizational impact?

## Take an Expansive View

To move a board from good to great, though, there is a rationale to go beyond simply assessing board role fulfillment. Truly embracing evaluation as a well-being strategy requires taking a more expansive, holistic view of the board ecosystem to include interpersonal relationships, emotional intelligence, perceptions, satisfaction, and commitments as well as leadership capabilities such as creativity, agility, and adaptability. Simply, a board's success in executing upon its role is indelibly shaped by "softer" dimensions of board performance. For example, board relationship quality directly impacts each member's ability to participate in constructive debate, productive decision making, and continuous learning. Therefore, there is value at looking how to improve these dimensions of board performance, as well.

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It is more challenging to quantify less tangible soft skills than to capture outputs or technical abilities. However, each of these things are crucial for effective collaboration and for navigating today's dynamic healthcare environment. So, designing a more holistic board evaluation will be reliant upon more qualitative information, such as self-reported perceptions and felt needs. Some questions to consider could include:

- What is the quality of social connection and cohesion between board members?
- Is there a standard of open dialogue and psychological safety where members feel free to share opinions and concerns without fear of judgement or reprisal?
- Does trust exist between board members? With executive leaders?
- Do board members bring self-awareness and empathy to decision making?
- Does the board deal with conflict respectfully and constructively?
- Do you gain a sense of personal meaning and fulfillment from board service?
- Do you achieve satisfaction and growth through your board experience?

## Conclusion

Repositioning board evaluation as a well-being exercise not only achieves the basic objective of promoting accountability to ensure the board fulfills its obligations to stakeholders and to identify areas for growth and enhancement but also can promote new levels of effective functioning and even thriving within the board body. By taking a more expansive view of board evaluation, there is an opportunity to strengthen culture, deepen individual engagement, enhance board dynamics, and even deepen commitment to mission. Ultimately, fostering the whole well-being of a board means it is better equipped to advance the mission.

## Recommended Resources

- [Board Self-Assessment: A Core Responsibility](#) (Elements of Governance)
- [Human Understanding in Healthcare Organizations: A Board and Senior Leadership Framework](#) (Strategy Toolkit)
- [Board Culture](#) (Intentional Governance Guide)
- ["Building an Olympic-Caliber Board"](#) (E-Briefings Article)

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