

Governance Notes

AUGUST 2024

Repositioning Board Evaluation as a Well-Being Strategy

By Betsy Chapin Taylor, FAHP, CEO, *Accordant*

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.

What's Inside:

- Repositioning Board Evaluation as a Well-Being Strategy
- Setting the Foundation: A Framework for Governance Support Staff Onboarding
- Building a Trusting Relationship between Governance Support Professionals and the Board

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.

Board evaluation should be a routine, objective element of board maintenance to support performance improvement, promote accountability, and illuminate opportunities for redirection or refinement.

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.

To move a board from good to great there is a rationale to go beyond simply assessing board role fulfillment.

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)

The Governance Institute thanks Betsy Chapin Taylor, FAHP, CEO of Accordant, for contributing this article. She can be reached at betsy@accordanthealth.com.

Setting the Foundation: A Framework for Governance Support Staff Onboarding

Governance support professionals have a big role to play in their organizations. They are the drivers of intentional governance. Their efforts help ensure board members are ready for their role, prepared for meetings, focused on the organization's mission and vision, and always performing at their best. To do this effectively means executing a myriad of duties aimed at governance success. It can be a balancing act even for the most seasoned governance support professional. Those new to the role will need thorough onboarding to get up to speed. This article highlights a few key elements of governance support onboarding.

A Detailed Explanation of the Role and Core Tasks

Understanding the governance support role is the first step in being successful at the job. This should start with providing a clear job description that highlights the main duties. Then those duties should be explained in detail. For example, training will often occur for common support tasks, such as:

- **Preparing for board and committee meetings:** Maintaining a calendar, organizing the meeting, gathering and finalizing documents for the board packet, providing reminders and information for the meetings, and assisting with agenda development.
- **Taking minutes at meetings:** Tips for taking meeting minutes, including the best way to summarize board deliberation on a matter and record the outcome of board votes or motions. It is important for minute takers to have a strong understanding of corporate documentation requirements for non-profit hospitals to ensure that the meeting minutes include the right amount of information.
- **Providing a board reference manual:** What board bylaws, policies, and other pertinent information are included, how board members access the manual, and when it is updated.
- **Maintaining board documents:** Coordinating the preparation of materials requested by the board and committees, keeping all records and files in a safe place, and meeting compliance requirements.
- **Facilitating board orientation and continuing education:** For new board members, developing, coordinating, and updating board orientation programs and providing individual assistance as needed. For seasoned members, conducting a continuing education needs assessment and developing continuing education programs and schedules.

Governance support professionals are the drivers of intentional governance.

- **Assisting with board self-assessments:** Working with the governance effectiveness committee (or committee responsible for this) to help organize and facilitate assessments and develop improvement plans based on the results.

For this part of onboarding, it is helpful for new governance support staff to review related documents such as past board packets, meeting minutes, the current board reference manual, and education plans. This is also a good time to provide training on tools such as the board portal or common templates utilized.

In addition to receiving support on how to accomplish their key responsibilities, it is critical to help the new support staff understand why each task is important. For example, this could include discussion around the consequences of missing critical details in the meeting minutes or not keeping board records in a safe place. More broadly, this also could include discussing the significance of the role and how everything the support person does facilitates assisting the board in leading the organization.

An Understanding of the Organization and the Board's Role

New governance support staff will need to gain a firm grasp of the organization's history, its role in the community, and its mission and vision. If they are new to the organization, more time should be spent getting them up to speed on these aspects of the hospital or health system. Since they will be working with the board, it can be helpful for them to also learn more about the current strategic plan as well as organizational leadership, especially those leaders that regularly work with the board.

To best support the board, new governance support professionals need training on the governance framework and the board's responsibilities, including:

- The governance structure (number of boards and committees and how they interact)
- Board members' fiduciary duties of oversight, care, loyalty, and obedience
- Expectations of board members
- Addressing conflicts of interest
- The difference between the board's role and the role of the CEO and management
- The responsibilities of each committee

This can be a lot to digest, but understanding the organization and the role of the board is essential to supporting governance efforts. Providing examples whenever possible (e.g., a time when the board got too far into operations and the related consequences) can aid in a deeper level of understanding.

Understanding
the organization
and the role
of the board
is essential
to supporting
governance
efforts.

Tips for Communicating and Engaging with Board Members

When possible, it is always best if there is a chance for the outgoing governance support professional or someone else who is very familiar with the board to train the new person. This will allow key details to be shared such as board members' individual communication preferences, best practices and templates for regular engagement like meeting reminders or educational resources, tips for selecting and distributing information that may be of interest to the board, typical processes for coordinating travel to conferences or retreats, and follow-up that needs to take place after board or committee meetings.

In addition to communicating with the board, the governance support person will also be facilitating communication between the board and leadership or the medical staff, so it is helpful for the new person to learn more about senior leaders' roles and how they generally interact with the board.

In-Person Experience and Ongoing Education

The learnings above set the foundation for the role, but the most valuable experience is having the new governance support professional sit in on board and committee meetings. This gives them a chance to see how the board and committees accomplish their work and to ask detailed questions afterwards.

Just as the board completes ongoing education after onboarding, so should governance support professionals. Professional development can keep governance support staff current on healthcare trends and governance best practices and give them a chance to learn from peers in similar roles. For example, The Governance Institute offers a yearly Governance Support Forum and has many resources geared towards governance support professionals.¹ Larger health systems with governance support teams also often conduct educational programs for their governance support staff and have regularly scheduled board liaison calls to share information and encourage collaboration.

The governance support role is not an easy one to learn—it requires a deep understanding of governance and the organization, the ability to build trusting relationships, a high level of organization to keep the board knowledgeable and on task, and the capability to handle many moving pieces. A comprehensive onboarding will help ensure that new governance support staff are prepared for their responsibilities and ready to assist the board in continuing its mission-critical work.

1 See www.governanceinstitute.com/governancesupport.

Additional TGI Resources:

- [Governance Support: A Behind the Scenes Guide to Ensure Your Board is Prepared, 2nd Edition](#) (Elements of Governance)
- [The Distinction between Management and Governance, 2nd Edition](#) (Elements of Governance)
- [“Meeting Minutes: Lessons from the Field”](#) (Governance Notes Article)
- [Governance Policies: Roadmaps for Best Practices, 3rd Edition](#) (Elements of Governance)
- [Sample Job Description: Governance Support Person/Board Coordinator](#) (Governance Support Template)
- [Healthcare Acronyms & Terms for Boards and Medical Leaders, 12th Edition](#)

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.

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.

“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

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.

