

March 2020
bob@rchcae.com

When the Board Wants Help

Bob Harris, CAE

Not all board members have an equal knowledge of governance. Some benefit from experiences on other boards. Others are novices.

Seldom does a board say, “we need help.” In theory the directors all attended board orientation. It may be difficult to acknowledge when a board feels apprehensive about skills.

Board Evaluation

A good way to identify or broach any insecurities about governance is to conduct a board evaluation. The board is used to evaluating the budget, and possibly the executive director, but what about their own performance?

One approach is to time at the end of a meeting to ask, “How do you think we’re doing?” It can be a discussion led by the chief elected officer. To encourage frank discussions, the staff might leave the room.

An alternative is to send a survey to the board to seek input. The mere fact of asking for input promotes continuous improvement.

Question	Yes	No	Unsure
1. How well do I understand and advance the mission?			
2. Do I understand and comply with the governing documents?			
3. Do I arrive at meetings having prepared?			
4. Do I understand financial aspects of the organization?			
5. Do we measure performance of the board, programs and committees?			
6. Am I considering which persons will succeed me on the board of directors?			
7. Do I find board service to be satisfying			
8. Is the strategic plan the primary roadmap for board action?			
9. Is there trust and respect among board, committees, members and staff?			
10. Do I monitor trends and the external influences to bring insights to the boardroom?			

Here are common board questions and some solutions to their concerns.

1. How well do I understand and advance the mission?

The mission is the purpose for existence. It may be supplemented with vision and values statements. Directors should be able to recite the mission. All discussions and decisions should consider the mission statement.

2. Do I understand and comply with the governing documents?

Directors have a difficulty governing if they have not received and read the governing documents. When questioned, it is not unusual to encounter directors who have not read the bylaws. Their responsibilities are described in the bylaws and policies. The doctrine of volunteer immunity will be impacted by whether they have read the

documents.

3. Do I arrive at meetings having prepared?

To fulfill fiduciary duties, there is a need to come to meetings having read reports and formulated questions. When the agenda is distributed it is a good time to ask for and read reports. Questions should be addressed to committee chairs, officers and the executive director. The worst example of a director is one who shows up at the meeting, opening the board packet at the last minute, skimming it for details. Preparation is a key part of board accountability.

4. Do I understand financial aspects of the organization?

Even successful businesspeople may find a financial statement, budget and IRS Form 990 confusing. The board should have access to the counsel of a CPA to answer questions. A board wants to be sure policies and safeguards are in place to protect financial resources.

5. Do we measure performance of the board, programs and committees?

Everything can be measured, from diversity to government relations. Are decisions influenced by groupthink or based on knowledge? A frequent question at the board table should be, "How will we measure success if we adopt this program?" Rely on dashboards to keep the board informed of important data and trends.

6. Am I considering which persons will succeed me on the board of directors?

Directors must identify new leaders. The best way to draw future leaders is to ask, "Will you serve?" Initiate an emerging leaders' program, and turn to committees, for a pipeline of interested leaders.

7. Do I find board service to be satisfying?

If the leadership experience is not satisfying, what needs to be changed? Does the meeting last too long, lack content, or the board meets too frequently? When leaders are dissatisfied with board service, they quit showing up, come unprepared, or resign.

8. Is the strategic plan the primary roadmap for board action?

Familiarity with the strategic plan is important. The board's role is to advance the plan. Nearly every discussion and motion should link to the strategic plan. At least annually the board will want to review progress on the plan.

9. Is there trust and respect among board, committees, members and staff?

It takes a team to advance the mission and goals. If distrust exists, it will harm relationships and results. Directors want to communicate respect to all persons. The board and staff should have professional, collegial relations, working as a team to serve members.

10. Do I monitor trends and the external influences to bring insights to the boardroom?

Directors represent the concerns of the membership, not their own interests. Directors should interact and listen to their community. A good leader is a sounding board for others, bringing information and perspectives to meetings.

Resources

Provide help for a board that wants to expand their governance knowledge. Make the annual orientation mandatory. Throughout the year, offer micro-bursts on leadership topics.

Invite an experienced executive or officer who can enhance board understanding. Seek the counsel of a lawyer, CPA, or insurance agent to address board questions.

Books that improve board understanding include, *The Perfect Board*, *ABC's of Parliamentary Procedure*, and *Your Director Hat*.

#

Note: Bob Harris, CAE, provides free governance tips and templates at www.nonprofitcenter.com.

Question	Yes	No	Unsure
1. How well do I understand and advance the mission?			
2. Do I understand and comply with the governing documents?			
3. Do I arrive at meetings having prepared?			
4. Do I understand financial aspects of the organization?			
5. Do we measure performance of the board, programs and committees?			
6. Am I considering which persons will succeed me on the board of directors?			
7. Do I find board service to be satisfying			
8. Is the strategic plan the primary roadmap for board action?			
9. Is there trust and respect among board, committees, members and staff?			
10. Do I monitor trends and the external influences to bring insights to the boardroom?			