

Culture Shift in Governance

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I promote the concept of a high performing board committed to advancing organizational excellence and achieving results.

An executive asked, "What you're saying is that if we make the changes, our board will govern more and manage less? How do we change the culture of a board that has been satisfied to attend meetings without much concern for outcomes?"

Executives are frustrated by boards characterized as the "lunch-bunch," a group that meets to hear reports, receive updates and enjoy friends.

Symptoms of an underperforming board may be a lack of quorums, disengaged directors, ill-preparation for meetings, and little concern for impact. The phrase you hope never to hear from directors is, "But we are just volunteers." In reality they are a team serving as trustees of the corporation.

Transform the Culture

Transformation of a board takes time. Behaviors and structures existent for years can be hard to change. Approach it with baby steps. , Start by discussing the agenda format, then talk about meeting frequency, followed by size of the board, for example.

- ☐ **Increase Expectations** – Some directors join a board because it looks good on their resume or it is an enjoyable experience. Explain the organization purpose and how the board is vital for organizational success.
- ☐ **Be Truthful** - Be honest about the amount of time and resources required for effective governance. The top lie by a nominating committees is, "You won't have to do anything when you get on the board."
- ☐ **Right People** – As the book *Good to Great* offers, get the right people in the right seats on the bus. The average size board is 15 persons. Is the board composition based on geography, interests, chapters or more importantly ability and leadership experience? In large boards directors might disengage.
- ☐ **Guests** – Guests at meetings may support transparency and channels of communication, but they can be a distraction to authentic conversation. Reconsider the purpose and value of involving ex-officio, emeritus, members,

reporters, etc.

- ❑ **Train** – Governing requires knowledge. Directors must understand fiduciary roles, finances and expectations. As trustees of the corporation they should be hungry for learning to improve functions and outcomes. It can be difficult for an executive director to conduct the orientation because they are addressing their “bosses.” Make it a team approach with the executive, attorney, and accountant or seek a governance specialist.
 - ❑ **Promote the Mission** – The mission should frame nearly every discussion and action by the board. Keep it in front of the board and encourage volunteer leaders to ask, “How does this advance our mission?” Directors should be able to recite it.
 - ❑ **Be Strategic** – Have a strategic plan the board references as its roadmap or GPS. Some boards don’t know they have a plan. Others get distracted by a crisis or the board chair’s priorities. (I felt sorry for the executive who said, “My board drafted a plan and then told me it is my job to work the plan by myself.”)
- “Continuous improvement requires methods of evaluation.”*
- ❑ **Visionary** – Directors should share a vision as to what success looks like. Do meetings end with expected results? Are things on track for a successful year and well into the future? Most visions are nearly impossible to achieve but keep the work in the right direction.
 - ❑ **Awareness** – Directors should be conversant in key areas. They must protect and properly allocate the budget and resources. They must read and adhere to governing documents. Goals should be clear and easy to describe.
 - ❑ **Role Respect** – The board governs and the staff manages. Directors get the roles confused when they dive into staffing issues, administrative questions or committee work. A good board carries out their duties at a level characterized as 50,000 foot and higher; resolutely staying out of the weeds. A culture of respect is essential; address signs of disrespect quickly.
 - ❑ **Meeting Agendas** – Postpone meetings if there is no reason to convene. Consider meeting frequency and length. Design an agenda strategically advances the mission and goals. Use the consent agenda process to reduce reports at meetings. Include the plan’s goals right on the agenda so the board stays focused.

- ❑ **Evaluate Performance** – Continuous improvement requires methods of evaluation. Encourage the board to discuss their own performance. At the close of meetings and events, and at year's end, the board should assess if goals were achieved.
- ❑ **Address the Problems** – Board problems might arise from directors not fulfilling duties, leaks of confidential information, problematic meeting formats, excessive absences, etc. The officers should collaboratively address the issues as they arise.

The USA's 1.5 million nonprofits all have boards of directors. Some perform better than others. To shift governance culture discuss the ideas with the officers so they understand the rationale and opportunities to improve.

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