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Evaluating Board Performance

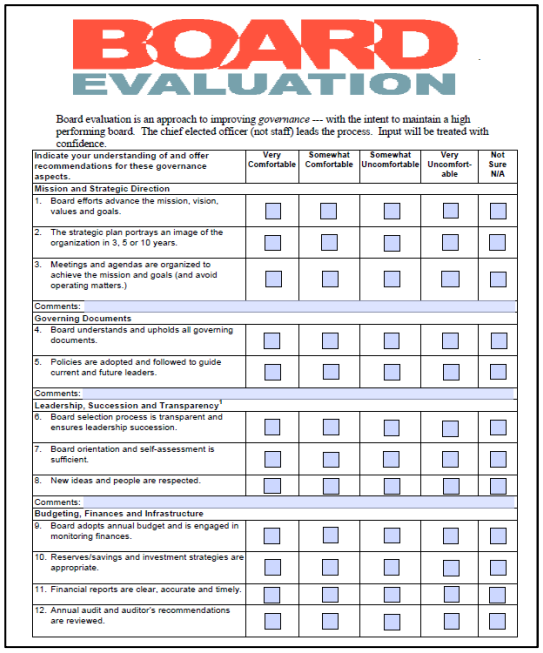
Shawna Strickland, PhD and Bob Harris, CAE

The last item on the agenda was, "Board Evaluation." The board packet included a form for a self-evaluation --- sort of a report card for the board.

Two of the directors noticed the item with curiosity. One of the directors said, "They can't evaluate us, we are volunteers."

Directors are responsible for the governing the association. Good governance includes advancing the mission, protecting resources and serving members.

The opposite of good governance would be poor attendance and a lack of quorums, board meetings characterized as a waste of time to read reports, or directors unfamiliar with the mission and strategic plan. An evaluation is a platform to remedy these situations.



BOARD EVALUATION

Board evaluation is an approach to improving *governance* --- with the intent to maintain a high performing board. The chief elected officer (not staff) leads the process. Input will be treated with confidence.

Indicate your understanding of and offer recommendations for these governance aspects.	Very Comfortable	Somewhat Comfortable	Somewhat Uncomfortable	Very Uncomfort-able	Not Sure N/A
Mission and Strategic Direction					
1. Board efforts advance the mission, vision, values and goals.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2. The strategic plan portrays an image of the organization in 3, 5 or 10 years.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3. Meetings and agendas are organized to achieve the mission and goals (and avoid operating matters.)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Comments:					
Governing Documents					
4. Board understands and upholds all governing documents.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5. Policies are adopted and followed to guide current and future leaders.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Comments:					
Leadership, Succession and Transparency[1]					
6. Board selection process is transparent and ensures leadership succession.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
7. Board orientation and self-assessment is sufficient.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
8. New ideas and people are respected.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Comments:					
Budgeting, Finances and Infrastructure					
9. Board adopts annual budget and is engaged in monitoring finances.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
10. Reserves/savings and investment strategies are appropriate.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
11. Financial reports are clear, accurate and timely.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
12. Annual audit and auditor's recommendations are reviewed.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Every association strives for a high performing board. The process of measuring performance can be both affirming and revealing.

At the American Association for Respiratory Care, we find the self-evaluation process helps us to accomplish the association's goals and allows time to reflect on the past year. Inevitably the discussion is how we can improve our performance.

In 2015, AARC's newly installed president discussed board effectiveness with the executive committee and discovered that there was a sense of disconnect after meetings concluded. Conferring with the executive director, he decided to survey the board with the goal of identifying shortcomings in the board's processes and to generate ideas for improvement.

Process

Volunteers may not immediately see the value of such an activity. Directors have been known to say they are too busy for the assessment or think there are better ways to use board time. Don't be dissuaded by these plaints.

An evaluation of the board should be viewed as an opportunity for organizational improvement. Though like any review, it can seem intimidating.

Some associations develop a one or two page self-evaluation and include it in the orientation process and leadership manual. That way directors are made aware at the start of their term that continuous improvement processes and performance measuring tools are available.

Some organizations email the evaluation to directors half way through their term asking them to complete it in confidence and return it to the chief elected officer. He or she can review and make suggestions. At the next meeting the input is discussed with agreement on how to make improvements.

For example, the board may indicate meetings are too long, too short or too frequent. They might suggest the reports are overwhelming leaving no time for meaningful discussion. Or they could offer that a redesign of the meeting agenda would improve outcomes. All ideas worthy of discussion.

Others go into executive session (without staff or guests) to discuss the evaluation as a group. Allow 30 minutes for the task, making notes of ideas to improve governance. Nobody should object to contributing 30 minutes one time a year to make improvements in the association.

There may be subliminal value even if the evaluation form is made available but there is no time to complete it. The message is that volunteer directors know that the association strives for continuous improvement.

Results

At the AARC, the board welcomed the opportunity to reflect on communications, governance and decision making processes. The survey became a regular platform for offering suggestions and how directors can improve outcomes.

Several board members recommended more time in the meeting collaborating on strategic goals versus listening to the reading of reports in the board book. The president and executive office took the feedback and implemented a more streamlined approach to meetings with time slots to focus on achieving strategic goals in round table formats.

Suggestions

Continuous improvement for all facets of an organization should be a part of its culture. Once the board realizes the benefit of self-evaluation, consider adopting a policy that it will be conducted regularly.

The policy might read, “At least annually the board of directors will undertake a process to review its performance and make suggestions for continuous improvement in association governance.”

By sharing the results everyone on the board knows of any concerns. This promotes honesty and transparency among peers.

Staff members are generally not included in the process except to help implement improvements. It would be difficult for a paid staff member to announce, “This is the meeting when we rate your performance.”

If the process is not done on paper at the meeting, consider an on-line survey distributed after the meeting. The responses will be tabulated and reviewed by the chief elected officer.

Don’t leave out the executive director. Though he or she may not be involved in the assessment process, the executive will have ideas and resources to implement improvements.

In summary, every association wants a high performing board. Although directors serve as volunteers, they can improve governance through self-evaluation and strategic enhancements.

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Note: Bob Harris, CAE, provides board tips and templates at www.nonprofitcenter.com. Shawna Strickland, PhD, RRT-NPS, AE-C, FAARC, is the Associate Executive Director of Member Services at AARC.