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Is Your Board Missing Out on the Value of a Board Self-Assessment?

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Self-assessment is widely recognized as a discipline that exemplifies excellent governance. It is a means of periodically taking a critical look at the board and its performance of a number of key responsibilities. As governance has been increasingly recognized as a complex undertaking, and as the life cycles of boards have become better understood, the value of reassessment has been increasingly acknowledged and stipulated as a standard for high-performing boards.

The primary deliverable of an assessment process is an action plan which allows the Board to specify and prioritize its own development over the course of several years. This explicit plan helps to get all board and staff members on the same page regarding the board's work and future direction. A secondary benefit of the assessment process is to educate the board and reinforce the importance and range of its responsibilities.

The Assessment Tool

There are several tools available for board assessment. BoardSource offers an online self-assessment tool which has a number of benefits: it is well-tested, provides both quantitative and open-ended feedback, and allows for assessment of the collective board as well as the individual director, and is available in an on-line version which provides for automatic tabulation of results, anonymity, and ease of administration. Bill Musick of Integriti3D has received training from BoardSource on the use of their tool as well as other aspects of basic and advanced board consulting. Integriti3D can also develop customized on-line assessment tools based upon client requests.

Typical Scope of Work

Best practice for Board Self-Assessment includes five phases:

1. Planning
2. Data Collection
3. Interpretive Summary
4. Assessment Retreat with Development of Action Plan
5. Implementation of Action Plan with Coaching Support

Experts in the field recommend that an objective outsider, knowledgeable about nonprofit governance, facilitate the process and create a safe and productive environment for interpreting the data and developing a workable action plan. While a consultant may raise questions and offer alternatives, their role is not to make specific recommendations – rather it is to help the board make effective use of the

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assessment and make their own decisions about what is best for their organization. Skilled consultants can also include training on key topics as part of the feedback and action planning process.

An Interpretative Summary is a document prepared by an outside consultant which frames the major themes that are expressed in the data summary. It is typically three to five pages long. It can help connect the dots for issues that run across question categories or it can raise apparent contradictions in responses from one section to another. The consultant can also have access to blinded individual scores that may help determine whether outlier scores are coming consistently from a few persons or whether they are coming from a broad number of respondents.

The action planning retreat consists of a brief review of the interpretative summary and assessment detail, but focuses primarily on exercises to identify and develop priorities for board action with an emphasis on the board's own work (as opposed to the work of the staff of the organization). Integriti3D can also tailor specific elements to achieve other objectives such as team building or training on responsibilities that appear to be unclear based on the assessment results.

In order to avoid losing momentum following the retreat and to help insure that all action plan tasks are met, Integriti3D can provide coaching services to the Chief Executive and Board Chair. The focus of regular conference calls and email correspondence can be: what roadblocks are you running into and how can they be overcome, what skills do the Chief Executive and Board Chair want to better develop in order to move the board to higher levels of performance, and how can the Chief Executive and Board Chair work together for the organization's greatest good.

Typical Time Line

The following represents a typical time frame for completing the process. Preparation could take longer depending upon the ability for Board Chair and Executive Director to schedule time to resolve basic framework and timing for the project.

1. Preparation (Weeks 2-3)
    a. Organization agrees to undertake assessment process and secures tool and consultant, if desired.
    b. If using a consultant, Board Chair and Executive Director confer with consultant to review plans and assumptions and to set the start, reminder and completion dates for the online assessment process. This includes decisions about any non-board members who will be asked to complete the assessment, and specifics about the retreat and its agenda.
2. Data Collection (Weeks 4-6)
    a. Consultant supplies drafts of invitation to participate and reminder message for customization.
    b. Organization supplies information and emails invitation.
    c. Reminders emailed
    d. Survey is finalized. Summary data is available for use.
3. Interpretive Memo prepared (Weeks 7-8)
4. Retreat Held with Action Plan Development (Week 9 or later)

5. Board implements action plan with ongoing coaching from consultant (3 - 12 months)