

PILLARS TO SUPPORT AN ENGAGED, INFORMED AND FOCUSED BOARD – PART 1

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SUMMARY

All hospices would benefit from healthy, engaged and informed governance – a board firing on all cylinders and being, in and of itself, a competitive advantage for the organization that it supports. In this article we look at the first three of six pillars that support a healthy and engaged board.



All hospices would benefit from healthy, engaged and informed governance – a board firing on all cylinders and being, in and of itself, a competitive advantage for the organization that it supports. Too often, though, boards and chief executives settle for something less. Whether it's because it takes too much of the chief executive's energy; or

that board members already feel pressured to deal with what they have on their plates; or that feeling of “we tried that already” (a workshop, a retreat, an article); or the sense of “let's not fix something that's not broken” or “we've already come a long way,” or simply that it's not clear how to get traction. Building a high-performing board takes an intentional, ongoing effort.

Continuous improvement isn't something that only applies to clinical and financial operations.

You may have noticed that I often use the term "governance," and not "boards." Governance occurs at the intersection of the chief executive and the board, especially in those cases where the chief executive may not be a formal member of the board. Good governance is the joint responsibility of both.

The Japanese concept of Kaizen engendered "Continuous Quality Improvement," and embraces the idea that every aspect of our lives deserves to be constantly improved. Board engagement is no exception. In fact, because board members meet only periodically and have other demanding responsibilities which claim the vast majority of their waking hours, creating and/or changing board culture is no simple task. One healthier habit at a time is a way to begin, but long-term cultural changes usually require intentional work with buy-in from all of those involved.

A frequent lament of hospice chief executives is that their boards are not as engaged as the chief executives would like.

And maybe you've seen some of these symptoms in the past or with a current board – do any of those look familiar?

Early Warning Signs of Board Disengagement

1. Attendance at board meetings is spotty/can't get a quorum
2. One person or group dominates
3. Committees aren't active or productive
4. Board isn't involved in fundraising/ < 100% giving
5. Difficulty recruiting board members, chairs, officers
6. The staff and board leadership are rarely challenged
7. Directors attend meetings out of sense of obligation
8. Problematic board member behavior is overlooked
9. Staff views the board as irrelevant or out of touch

The irony is that board members do want to be engaged. They want to make a difference and have an impact on the community their organization serves. However, there are things that get in the way of healthy engagement. The most common are:

- Lack of a vibrant and well-articulated mission, vision and/or values – no compelling reason to engage
- Lack of connection between board's work and mission/vision – the board is focused on something other than a compelling vision
- Lack of understanding of the board's role and responsibilities; a lack of consistency and clarity that makes it hard to focus the energies of a board and the Chief Executive

- Board meetings which have no vital purpose – board members don't feel that they're adding value
- Directors who lack time or commitment to mission – the wrong people on the bus
- Low team cohesion/dysfunctional group dynamics – not harnessing the collective value of the entire board due to domineering members or elephants in the room.

While there's no magic bullet that can instantly transform the governance of a hospice organization, I've flipped these common barriers into positive statements that I call the six "pillars."

In this article, we'll focus on the first three pillars – those that deal with the focus of the board and its meetings. In a following article, I'll focus on the last three pillars that relate to the selection, onboarding and inculturation of individual board members.

Pillar #1: Vibrant Vision, Mission and Values

The first pillar is Vibrant Vision, Mission and Values. You may wonder exactly what we mean by Vision, Mission and Values. Different people assign different interpretations to each of these elements. But the main thing that they do is to help answer the question of "Why?"

Why...

- the organization exists
- anyone should devote time and/or money to the organization
- this organization is different other similar ones

A vision is so important because we, as human beings, are genetically programmed to solve problems, and when we start with problems, we are only looking at our what is at our feet, rather than the farthest horizon.

I often refer to the "highest potential" of an organization or of a board. I often use it in opposition to problem solving which can get you a different end result than if you first define your vision for highest potential and do the reverse engineering to figure how you can put the pieces into place to move you in that

We could spend all day debating the difference between a vision and a mission, but one important distinction that I'd like you to keep in mind today, is that there are two ways of looking at a Vision for an organization.

The most common is to think about a vision for the organization – what does it look like in 5, 10 or more years. A colleague of mine uses the example of an organization that operates domestic abuse shelters. She walked into their offices and saw a large sign proclaiming their vision was to be the largest network of shelters in the state. Well, think about it. To get larger

– what would they need to see happen – more abuse???

A second, and I think a much more powerful, way is to think about a vision for the community if the organization is completely successful. What does a community look like when everyone is respected for who they are, and what does it take to achieve that?

So, I encourage client organizations to think of Vision as a description of the community once an organization is entirely successful – it's a much better answer to the question of Why.

A Mission statement then becomes a description of how the organization will achieve that vision: what will it do, and who will it work for and with. Different organizations may share a vision, but take different slices of the pie to focus upon. If we take the domestic violence sector, one organization may focus on prevention, another on shelters, another on offender re-entry into the community.

The third part of setting direction is Values. Values are essential truths that need to guide and brand your organization if you are to achieve your Vision.

But often Values statements often don't really differentiate the organization or tie inextricably to a vision or mission. If you look at various values statements, it's often difficult to know whether you're looking at a values statement from Enron, Proctor & Gamble or a hospice ... they're almost identical and generic. But there are

organizations that do a better job of connecting values to their vision and mission. Consider this value statement from a large hospice provider:

Patients and families come first.

We take care of each other.

I'll do my best today and do even better tomorrow.

I am proud to make a difference.

That's much more compelling than something like: People, Integrity, Trust, Service, Excellence, Quality.

Here are some questions to test whether your Vision, Mission, and Values are robust and compelling:

- How do your Vision, Mission and Values differentiate your hospice from other similar organizations?
- What do you promise to your clients and your community?
- How are you changing and transforming your community?
- Is your vision about your organization or about your community?

Pillar #2:

Board's Work Connects to Mission and Values

The second pillar is that the Board's work connects to its compelling Vision/Mission/Values.

Think about it What is the focal point of your board meetings? Is it focused on the past (committee reports, financial statements, audits) or on the future?

There's a saying that goes: "Remember the size of the windshield compared to the size of the rear-view mirror." Do your meetings reflect this emphasis on looking forward through the lens of a robust Vision? Do your meetings focus on the important (Vision/Mission) versus the urgent?

Fiduciary/Strategic/Generative Roles

Bill Chait and his colleagues at Harvard have conducted an exercise with thousands of board members and chief executives. They ask participants about their perceptions of a board by posing the following question: Board is to Organization as ... Blank is to Blank.

They find that the answers predictably break down into several categories:

Board is to Organization as...

Border collie : Cattle herd Inspector: Passport	Control
Compass : Navigation Rudder : Boat Guidance system: Satellite	Direction
Inspiration: Poet Values : Choices Spirit : Higher purpose Vision : Implementation	Meaning

Excerpted and adapted from: *Governance as Leadership*, Chait, Ryan and Taylor, © BoardSource 2005

The Control function is often called the Fiduciary or Oversight Role.

Chait calls the Direction role Strategic. This might include partnering with staff to scan environment; determining how best to get from A to B; and monitoring progress on that journey.

Meaning is labeled the Generative or Transformative Role of the board. It includes engaging in the questions of why B, as opposed to C or D? or What else should we be paying attention to?

Chait and his colleagues find that boards typically overemphasize the Oversight Role to the neglect of Strategic and Generative roles. I believe a large reason is our tendency to find problems and then want to prove that we can fix them.

A high-impact board intentionally spends time in all three roles, especially since the Strategic and Generative link most strongly to Vision, Mission and Values.

Pillar#3:

Board Meetings Focus on Vital Issues

The third pillar is board meetings that focus on vital issues.

High-quality meetings allow boards to make an impact and board members to add value and generate a sense of energy and engagement.

7 Characteristics of Excellent Meetings

1. Everyone was prepared
2. Meeting started and finished on time with everyone present and attentive throughout (respect)
3. Agenda and process were clear
Participants felt that they...
4. added value
5. learned something new
intensified their passion
experienced a sense of collegiality

There are a number of ways of creating time for Strategic and Generative discussions that also contribute to high satisfaction and output from a meeting. I'm going to focus on four.

Two of them relate to freeing up time for what's important. They're the 2 Con's: **Consent Agenda**, and **Consensus Cards**.

A Consent Agenda can streamline meetings by bundling a number of cursory items into one vote of approval. Any item on the Consent Agenda may be removed for broader discussion upon the request of any board member. Items often included in the Consent Agenda include:

- Minutes
- Chief Executive/Committee Reports
- Informational Items
- Change in bank signatories
- Monthly financial reports (if Finance Committee reviews monthly and full board reviews quarterly)

A second way to free up time for more important things is to condense decision making through the use of Consensus Cards.



Some of may have experienced a meeting where everyone feels a need to state their opinion, and as those opinions are shared, it turns out that almost everyone is in agreement. Consensus Cards can help get

a quick sense of the room and identify whether there is consensus or whether additional discussion will add value. The Serious Reservations card can help give voice to the “quietest” members in the room and raise awareness of concerns and avoid having those concerns drowned out by a chorus of “yes, I agree.”

Effective Executive Sessions can be a third way to make meetings more effective by a quick checkpoint on things such as:

- How are we doing?
- Are we making the best use of our time?
- How are we developing ourselves?
- What behavior are we settling for?
- Is there any UBUT (Unfinished business/unspoken thoughts)

The fourth way is to encourage robust discussions. Robust discussions can bring out the full expertise of board members and lead to better decision-making. Here are some questions that you might try:

- Who sees the situation differently?
- What are we missing?
- How would this look from the point of view of: _____?
- What unintended problems might we create?

An effective and engaging meeting leads to energy, commitment and expansive thinking.

That concludes our first three pillars of a healthy and engaged board. Up next: Pillars 4, 5 and 6.