Hospice Governance Academy®

Board Excellence

PILLARS TO SUPPORT AN ENGAGED, INFORMED AND FOCUSED BOARD – PART 2

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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 last 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" (whether 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.

While there's no magic bullet that can instantly transform the governance of a hospice organization, there are six pillars that contribute to a healthy, engaged and high-value board.

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

Pillar #4:
Committed Board Members

Pillar 4 is a process for recruiting and developing board directors who are committed to the organization and to making an impact by achieving the organization's robust vision and mission (see Pillar 1).

Many boards use a matrix of demographics and expertise to guide their search for new board members. I understand why, it's simpler, easy to peg people into categories, but it often tends to overlook what I consider to be the most important attributes of a prospective board member: passion, inquisitive thinking and team building skills. These qualities are much more important in the long run for creating a high-impact board than wealth or professional expertise.

Stretch outside your comfort zone to recruit for:
- Values vs. Expertise
- Collegiality vs. Congeniality
- External Relationships vs. Internal Relationships
- Questions vs. Answers

Once you have those passionate and emotionally intelligent people, invest in onboarding, training and building a practice of generative thinking.

Initiate orientation prior to election to the board, including:
- Multiple board members
- Summary overview of organization and key issues it is facing
- What's different/unique about our organization and our board
- Invite to attend at least one meeting with a designated member to debrief after the meeting
- Set high expectations – use Governance Policies (see Pillar #5) if you have them…if anyone is telling prospects that they don't need to worry about one or more expectations, you're undermining the development of a strong, engaged and impactful board.

Foster strong interpersonal relationships among board members from the start. Assign buddies who follow up before and after meetings, highlight and use members' subject matter knowledge when its appropriate, and provide opportunities for socializing.

Evaluation is an important element of building committed board members. It should occur in a number of ways: gathering feedback on the processes of the board such as recruitment and orientation, periodic self-assessment of the board as a whole, and feedback and self-evaluation for individual members either by the board chair or through a more formal 360° review process.

> *One Final Tip:*
> *Don't ever ask someone to join your board if they haven't asked you any questions.*

So, we've worked to ensure that we have board members who are passionate for your mission, inquisitive and well-oriented. The next task is making sure that roles and responsibilities are clear.

Pillar #5:
Clear Understanding of Roles and Responsibilities

Pillar #5 is a clear understanding of expectations, not only of board members, but of the Chief Executive as well.

> *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.*

While there is often a question about the role that a Chief Executive should play in governance, there is general consensus among those who study governance, that the Chief Executive has primary responsibility for developing a strong board.

Peter Drucker states: "In a well-functioning nonprofit organization, the executive will take responsibility for assuring that the governance function is properly organized and maintained."

And I love the description that Doug Eadie uses in his article: *Extraordinary Board Leadership – The Seven Keys to High-Impact Governance*. He says the Chief Executive's role is to lead from behind… by building appetite, securing commitment, and supporting the board's work, without diluting the board's accountability and ownership.

What about the Board Chair – she/he plays another key role in building a strong board. The chair's responsibilities include:
- Ensures effectiveness of the board in its roles and responsibilities
- Addresses the performance and development of individual board members
- Facilitates board and Executive Committee meetings
- Builds effective relationships with Chief Executive, board members and stakeholders
- Ensures transparency, compliance, and accountability
- Addresses board leadership succession

To perform the chair's role effectively, board chair candidates should possess a number of important qualities:

- Ability to work collaboratively with the Chief Executive and other board members
- Strong facilitation skills
- Models and encourages healthy team dynamics
- Ability to build board members commitment and energy
- Personal commitment to transparency, compliance, and accountability
- No significant personal agenda or conflict of interest

All of these expectations need to be clearly spelled out and agreed upon. Too often board members are expected to learn their roles by observing, but that can easily lead to "fuzziness" about expectations. Job descriptions are one way. Many boards go beyond bylaws and job descriptions by identifying "gray areas" where things may not be clear, or where there may appear to be double standards. These areas often include:

- Attendance
- Giving
- Troublesome members
- Relationship with staff
- Supporting decisions of the board
- How we want to articulate how we are different from other boards

Once these areas are identified, they can be documented in Governance Policies, with the board spelling out exactly what their expectations are of one another.

The Governance Policies then become a tool to use when talking to prospective board members and a basis for board self-assessment.

Pillar #6:
Healthy Team Dynamics

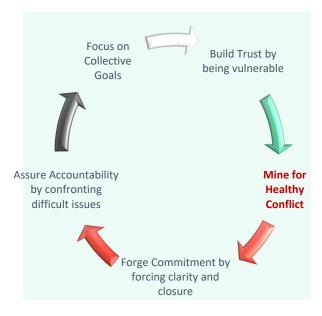The final pillar is an intentional focus on building a healthy team.

A Group is Not a Team.

Cathy Trower often uses a comparison of a Commuter Bus to a Team Bus carrying the state champion high school basketball team to make the point that a board should aspire to be more than just x number of intelligent individuals who happen to find themselves in a room together solving problems. On the commuter bus, everyone is headed in their own separate direction, focused on their own concerns and cellphones. Whereas on the team bus, people know each other's strengths and weaknesses, they have well-practiced plans, and they have a common goal. Building those team dynamics is the job of high-impact board.

Pat Lencioni, the author of *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, helps us understand key aspects of team building. Many years ago, Pat gave me permission to flip his Five Dysfunctions into their positive model shown below.

He calls on leaders to begin building trust by being willing to express vulnerability – acknowledging mistakes, doubts and issues for which you don't yet have an answer.

Adapted with permission from: The Five Dysfunctions of a Team, Patrick Lencioni, 2002 © John Wiley & Sons

He further recommends not only encouraging healthy conflict, but mining for it (similar to some of the robust questions shown in Pillar #3).

These steps create a self-reinforcing process of creating buy-in and commitment that allows a team to tackle difficult issues and not letting them go unresolved.

Other ways to encourage healthy conflict in the boardroom include:

- Assign devil's advocate role for each meeting or major topic
- Assign stakeholder roles during key discussions
- Train about the distinctions between conflict and personal attacks
- Recognize and reward healthy conflict

A final way to build stronger teams is to be aware of and to nurture the many relationships that exist in a governance team. Too often, regardless of our role, we can slip into the mindset that we have one relationship with the whole of the board (everyone else except us), when in reality we have a separate relationship with each person in the boardroom. It's particularly important for Chief Executives and Board Chairs to recognize the importance of building individual relationships, despite the time commitment that this involves.

Involving everyone in building a team culture can extend beyond the boardroom to include non-directors on board committees, who are often in the pipeline for eventual nomination to the board.

These six pillars support an engaged and impactful board. Take a minute and jot down any ideas you have that you'd want to bring forward to ensure your board is firing on all cylinders and is serving as a competitive advantage for your organization. Then look for an opportunity to share those ideas with your fellow board members.