

Effective Board Building

Creating and Maintaining a High-Performing and High-Satisfying Governing Board

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Governing Relationships in a Democratic Society

Board members enjoy a special kind of relationship, a way of relating to one another that is consistent with and conducive to the democratic process. Aristotle conceived of democracy as nothing less than the political extension of friendship. While political friendship is artificial compared to personal friendship, it can serve to transform disinterested strangers into friends through empathy and shared interests.

John Dewey argued that a fully democratic group respects both the individuality and competence of every member. However, appeals to cohesiveness and congeniality must not be used as means for manipulating members. An honest adversarial relationship is better than a false unity. Healthy governing relationships share the following characteristics:

1. Equally distributed decision making power
2. Inclusive membership
3. Democratic participation and deliberation
 - Equal and adequate opportunities to speak
 - No withholding of information
 - No verbal manipulation of one another
 - Ability and willingness to listen

Challenges Facing Boards

To operate as an effective governing body, boards must manage both tasks and relationships. In terms of tasks, boards must decide what they are going to do and how they will do it. In terms of relationships, board members face three critical challenges:

1. Relating to each other personally, as individuals, as fellow citizens.
2. Relating to one another consistent with and conducive to the democratic process by recognizing the competency and legitimacy of each member.
3. Relating to citizens and other public officials in a way that strengthens and supports representative democracy.

Dynamics of Working as a Group

- Communication, trust, honesty, respect, unity, divisiveness, power, control, inclusion and exclusion
- Listening, encouraging discussion, seeking information, exploring alternatives, expressing disagreement, soliciting feedback, seeking consensus, using past experience to improve decisions
- Strengthening trust, reducing stress, getting to know each other better, learning what makes each other tick, what we are passionate about, renewing our relationships with each other, better expressing ourselves, learning who we are as people

Dynamics of Working as a Board

- Philosophical differences about the role of the board and government
- Challenges we face, what we should do, direction, goals, priorities, purpose
- Creating a shared vision, planning for the future more than putting out fires, reducing split votes, accepting and publicly supporting board decisions
- Governing more than campaigning, discovering what we agree on, getting a sense of where we want to go, who we represent, and what we expect from each other and from our administrators

The Board's Governing Role

1. To make democracy, or "rule by the people," work.
2. To represent the entire community.
3. To recognize that the community's interests may be broader than those of any one board member.

The Board's Governing Responsibilities

1. To help create the "good life" for everyone by building the capacity of the community to solve public problems.
2. To forge partnerships with economic, community, and civic organizations.
3. To develop the potential of every citizen to participate in and contribute to the economic and civic life of the community.

The Board's Governing Relationships

1. Model democracy by practicing inclusion, active listening, and balancing speaking and listening rights and responsibilities.

2. Model respect for individuality, non-tyranny of the majority, recognize mutuality between members, affirm competence, and establish explicit norms for congeniality and civility.
3. Recognize that agenda setting, like informing, articulating, persuading, reframing, voting, and dissenting, is a form of democratic deliberation, and must include all members.

Common “Mistakes” Board Members Make

1. Lack of patience
2. Poor behavior, “acting out”
3. Challenging the board after a vote
4. Acting like the “Lone Ranger”
5. Not seeing the forest for the trees
6. Dropping bombs at board meetings
7. Personal or hidden agendas, being secretive vs. confidential
8. Getting stuck in the same alliances and coalitions regardless of the issue
9. Confusing means and ends, playing winning vs. losing, substituting voting for building consensus
10. Forgetting that being on the board is not a “one-night stand”
11. Lack of ground rules
12. The elected expert
13. Disregarding expert advice
14. Board-manager and policy making - administration tensions
15. Disengaged from community
16. Ways of speaking to members that are hurtful and close down communication, e.g., lecturing, chastising, threatening, bullying, disrespectful comments
17. Forgetting that “the world must be kept safe for differences.”
18. Short-term political considerations, pandering to special interests
19. Egos, fear of change, giving up control, fear of the unknown
20. Competition, turf, fairness, equity, zero-sum games, winners and losers
21. Numerical “rigor mortis” - “we’re a 3-2 board”
22. Suspicion, mistrust, distrust, lack of trust, dropping bombs, springing surprises, looking to embarrass colleagues or staff, playing “Gotcha”
23. Never changing positions, over-reliance on compromise
24. Too much talking, not enough listening
25. Too little leadership, board development, and skills building

Consequences of Board Mistakes

1. Unsatisfying communication
2. Diminished trust, respect, acceptance, tolerance
3. Increased stress, mistrust, frustration, anger, lashing out, fear
4. Loss of community respect, difficult to get things accomplished, sucks the energy out of us, makes us unproductive

5. Shows up in poor behavior, frustrating meetings, poor image in the eyes of the public, reduces level of enjoyment and satisfaction from being on the board
6. Low energy, diminished enjoyment and satisfaction
7. Decisions with poor shelf life
8. Negative impact on the public
9. Lose sight of purpose
10. Individuals act as the board
11. Disagreements become personal
12. Less tolerance for those who disagree
13. Split votes on important issues
14. Members stop listening, minority viewpoints are ignored
15. Members see winners and losers, us and them

Governing Lessons Identified by Experienced Board Members

1. Learning to acknowledge publicly that you have no power or authority as an individual board member, and that only the board as a whole can take action
2. Determining what your role is on the board and how to best accomplish it
3. That no matter what you know when you come on the board, you still have a lot to learn
4. Understanding the differences between the board's job and the administrator's job
5. That you must work to represent all of the residents in your community, not just special interest groups or those who voted for you
6. That change comes slowly
7. That you must think deeply about issues and sometimes accept a reality contrary to your own beliefs
8. Being able to hold the minority viewpoint when voting on an issue, but openly supporting the majority after the vote
9. Learning how to respond constructively to the concerns and complaints of citizens, constituents, businesses, staff, community groups, your spouse, your children, and your friends without creating a bigger problem for the folks whose job it is to try to solve the problem
10. That you can't solve everyone's problems by yourself

Common Board Member Expectations

1. Communicate honestly about what we expect from each other
2. Become more inclusive, more of a team - more equality between members
3. Learn more about what works well on boards, what doesn't
4. Less carryover of campaign behavior to board
5. Be honest without being hurtful
6. Develop and agree to useful ground rules/operating procedures
7. Better appreciate and use conflict and differences
8. Learn more about our individual strengths and weaknesses
9. Develop greater respect and better working relationships
10. Difference is a strength

- 11 .We need to be able to disagree but still work together
12. Disagreement doesn't mean you're against the board
13. Good relationships are critical to getting things done
14. To be listened to, to feel heard
15. Have more fun

Ground Rules for Effective Boards

1. Share all relevant information
2. Focus on interests, not positions
3. Be specific - use examples
4. Explain your statements and actions
5. Keep the discussion focused and to the point
6. Don't take cheap shots or otherwise distract the group
7. Participate as you are comfortable/capable
8. Make decisions by consensus
9. Disagree with any member, but disagree openly
10. Invite questions, comments, and feedback

Core Characteristics of High-Performing and High-Satisfying Boards

1. Mutual Responsibility- all members feel responsible for the board's results; meetings are managed efficiently and effectively, focusing on results and shared responsibility for process and outcomes
2. Participative Leadership - the board removes barriers to full and effective participation by all members, and members participate equally to the best of their abilities in planning and making decisions
3. Shared Purpose - members are aligned as to why the board exists and its purpose; conflict and differences are used creatively to develop alternative solutions and inform decisions
4. High Communication - a climate of trust, honesty, openness, and mutual respect exists on the board
5. Future Forward- the board is optimistic and opportunistic, it does not allow personal and environmental obstacles from keeping it from identifying and acting on opportunities, and members see change as an opportunity for personal growth and the growth of their community

Best Practices and Effective Strategies for Leading the Board

1. State specific objectives at the start
2. Make sure everyone knows they will have a chance to speak
3. Begin with questions related to the task
4. Check to see if you are on task
5. Don't reinforce or explore off-task remarks
6. Use close-ended questions to address off-task remarks, then tactfully ask the person who has made an off-task remark to relate their comment to the task at hand

7. Use open-ended questions to address on-task remarks, turn feedback into open-ended questions
8. Write information relevant to the task on an easel
9. Ask how to improve the next meeting, and incorporate one new idea
10. Summarize and reflect ideas
11. Model desired behaviors
12. Use humor, empathy, facts to manage contentious issues
13. Engage all board members
14. Restrict dominating individuals
15. Encourage honest search for consensus

Questions Boards Should Ask Themselves

1. Are we clear about our purpose?
2. How satisfied are we with the quality of our communication?
3. What's our level of trust?
4. Do disagreements become personal?
5. Is there less tolerance for those who disagree?
6. Do we agree on our goals and priorities?
7. Do we ignore minority viewpoints?
8. Do we play "win-lose" and "us and them?"
9. Do we share responsibility for leading our board?
10. Have we "bought-in" to the idea of the board?
11. Are we treating each other fairly?
12. Do individual members sometimes act as the board?
13. Have some members stopped listening to other members?
14. Do policy disagreements carry over to relationships?
15. Are we discouraging the manager?

Tips for Dealing with Difficult Meetings and Conversations

1. Ask open-ended questions to help them identify possible solutions to their problem, e.g., ask them how they would like the discussion to end; what results do they want to achieve - this will often reduce their frustration and feelings of helplessness.
2. Ask for specifics, and take notes during difficult conversations. You can shift a confrontation or personal attack to a more cooperative dialogue simply by asking an angry person to give details about why he or she is so upset. This will often calm the person, and may yield useful information.
3. One of the most effective ways to communicate is in writing. It allows you to present your points in an orderly fashion, which is not always possible during oral communication. Also, ask for complaints in writing, and assign the person fact-finding tasks.
4. Turn "us and them" into "we." Highlight the similarities between you and the other person. Conflict can be turned into cooperation when differences are downplayed. Use partnership words such as "we" and phrases like "Let's gather the information," or "Would you please help me understand the exact details?" Help them identify possible

solutions to their problem - this will often reduce their frustration and feelings of helplessness.

5. Listen attentively. They may just need to blow off steam, which could provide information that's important to you. Acknowledge. You can often de-escalate an angry tirade simply by acknowledging all or even some part of it, e.g., "You could be right about that, but we need to hear from others at today's meeting."
6. Restate - rephrase the person's problem to make sure you understand it.
7. Reflect - offer an empathetic response that verifies the person's real feeling, such as, "You seem to be very angry."
8. Reframe - ask them what is going on, what they were thinking, why they did what they did. This can help a person feel heard, listened to, understood and fairly treated. We usually react not to what somebody does, but to our interpretation of why they did it. The fact is that people's behavior is mostly about them, not you. It's an important perspective to keep in mind.
9. Establish realistic expectations. We often feel angry when we are frustrated - that is, when we want something and think someone or something is unfairly preventing us from getting it. You can minimize the sense of disappointment and resulting anger by making certain that others have realistic expectations. Help them understand that their frustration isn't the result of unfair or arbitrary action.
10. Use peer pressure. People are more likely to behave badly when they think they're anonymous or won't be held accountable. Make it easier to hold them responsible for their own actions. It may seem silly when everyone knows each other, but using name tags in a group setting, or having speakers introduce themselves by name before speaking can change the demeanor of the meeting. Remind folks that angry tirades make many of their colleagues feel uncomfortable and can interfere with listening and understanding what's happening.

Creating and Maintaining High-Performing and High-Satisfying Boards

1. Be willing to succeed or fail as a together. Create a "WAITT" attitude – "We're all in this together." Create a board that is aligned on purpose – it has a sense of common purpose about why the board exists. The critical point comes when members commit to do things as a board and live with the results – good or bad! This sense of cohesiveness acts as a "social glue" that holds the board together when things get tough.
2. Be willing to use and accept peer pressure to direct the behavior and performance of members – peer pressure will be your most powerful tool when members feel connected, and feel that their success is tied to the board's success.
3. Practice high communication to create a climate of trust and open, honest communication. Recognize that relationships within the board are mutually dependent. When members trust each other, they perceive each other as capable, dependable, and as acting with integrity. Members act with the board's interest in mind at all times.
4. Discuss expectations, both one-to-one and as a board. Conflict often arises from unmet or unrealistic expectations, and produces hurt, betrayal, and anger. Misplaced hurt and anger manifest themselves in behavior detrimental to the success and satisfaction of the board. Make sure expectations are realistic, and make all expectations explicit! Then

make sure to find a way to meet individual member's expectations and apply their talents to the board as a whole.

5. Pay attention to how you do things as well as what you do. It pays to monitor your processes (communication, meetings, decision making, etc.) because when you make them more effective, you increase the board's effectiveness. Set aside formal time to monitor relationships, processes, and outcomes. Create a board that is focused on task-one that keeps meetings and activities focused on results.
6. Think long-term. This investment won't produce quick fixes or short-term results. But it will strengthen the board and community over the long-term. Members should assume that they will be living with the outcomes of behaviors and decisions a long time, and the board should work to build norms that benefit members over the long haul.
7. Self-managing means "self-correcting" – most important problems and challenges are open-ended, meaning that a perfect decision or solution is impossible. Sometimes members and the board must take their "best shot" – then solicit feedback from everyone affected. High-performing boards do make mistakes – but they correct them. They practice continuous improvement and lifelong learning.
8. Practice leveling – this is the open, frank discussion of problems, issues, and concerns. Members are willing to speak up about problems and willing to listen to other members' perceptions of the problem. This is the core of trust. People make themselves vulnerable when they speak out about what they perceive or how they feel – trust is created when others accept these feeling and perceptions as real and important to the member who expresses them.
9. Focus on problems – not people. Don't point fingers! Ask "what" is the problem, not "who" is the problem? Focusing on the who creates defensiveness and mistrust. To fix problems, separate them from personalities. Make the problem belong to the board, not to an individual. Focus on the future, not the past. High-performing boards are future focused - they see problems and change as opportunities for growth and improvement. High-performing boards also deal with problems right away, and don't let them fester or linger. They practice rapid response - identifying and acting on opportunities.
10. Create a board contract - a living document that outlines members' agreements about roles, responsibilities, and expectations. Your contract should address at least four key areas: board management (e.g., setting up meetings, developing agendas, etc.); managing boundaries (procedures and processes for handling problems, issues, and responsibilities); information access (who has what, who gets what, who should share what with whom, etc.); and mutual support (adopting ground rules, agreeing to abide by them, monitoring board performance, self-evaluation, etc.). Create a sense of shared responsibility – an environment in which all members feel responsible for the board's performance and success.

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