

Governance Fundamentals

Board Culture

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1 Board Culture: Building a Climate of Trust and Respect

The board of directors has a crucial role to play in organizational performance and success. As you have seen from the previous sections of this toolkit, boards have many obligations and responsibilities.

However, a board’s success in ensuring that an organization achieves its vision and mission requires more than a governance framework and a set of policies and procedures. Board structures and policies set the stage for effective governance, but the culture of the board determines whether an organization will be truly exceptional. The leadership that comes from the board plays a key role in establishing and nurturing both the culture of the board and the culture of the organization.

Great health care organizations are those that demonstrate vision, courage and creativity. Strong leaders and empowered staff can result in better collaborative care, more productive teams, better recruitment and retention – and better patient care. Board leadership is critical to achieving an organizational culture that inspires and motivates staff to perform to their best ability and to achieve greatness.

1.1 What do we mean by ‘culture’?

Governance culture considers how board members interact with one another, and how board members behave, individually and collectively. It refers to the effectiveness of relationships - the way people work together and the formal and informal systems that support constructive interaction. Are disagreements between board members dealt with in an open and transparent fashion? Are dissenting opinions invited and valued? Are all board members made to feel included? Is there mutual respect between board members and staff?

1.2 Why is board culture important?

A truly successful organization is one in which the board and senior management team work together in an environment of accountability, diligence, engagement and candour. These are “soft” skills that a board must possess, and leadership that the board must provide, to achieve outstanding board and organizational performance - performance that reaches beyond the meeting of service targets to achieving such other measures as reputation as an outstanding employer, sector leadership, innovation and creativity, and the building of social and reputational capital.

Boards must set the tone of the organization – and demonstrate the kinds of qualities that produce outstanding organizations – traits like openness, transparency, creativity, and respect. It starts with the culture of the board itself.

1.3 Building a culture of trust and respect

Effective governance is not a static achievement. It is a dynamic process of learning, continuous quality improvement and relationship management that requires ongoing attention and focus. The result is a board that achieves synergy among its members, and with management. It leads by example, and nurtures a culture of excellence that permeates the organization.

What are some of the attributes and strategies that contribute to building a culture of respect and trust?

- A strong and effective relationship between the chair of the board and the executive director
- A clear understanding of and respect for the roles of the board, the board chair, the executive director and staff
- Respect for the decision-making process
 - Once a decision is made, the board should speak with one voice

- Staff and board must abide by decisions that have been agreed upon, even if it means some compromise to one's personal position
- An effective board chair – one who invites participation, is inclusive, approachable, able to chair a productive meeting
- Board agendas that provide time for substantive discussion of issues, opportunities and future directions
- An environment that encourages frank discussion and debate
 - A safe environment where board members can put forward ideas and opinions, where respectful dissent is not only tolerated it is welcomed as a way of enhancing the discussion
- Selection of board members who have the skills and the personal characteristics that will contribute to a positive, productive culture
- Board members who share the vision and mission and practice the values that underpin the organization
- Board members who are positive role models for staff in their interactions and actions, their commitment, their humility and their representation of the organization to other stakeholders
- Effective communication between board and staff
 - Mechanism for staff to put important issues in front of the board
 - Board transparency
 - Effective complaint resolution process that ends with board involvement, if required
- Board members who are committed to organizational excellence and who continue to challenge themselves and their colleagues to be the best that is possible
- Opportunities for board members to learn about governance and improve their skills and knowledge.
- Opportunities for members of the corporation (i.e. FHO physicians, community members) to engage in the work of the organization in a meaningful way – by participating in discussions, contributing to committees).

1.4 Putting Meaning to Culture

A useful starting place to ensure that board members and staff understand the importance of culture is to create a single page document titled, Our Philosophy of Governance. This page, which would form the first page of the Governance Manual, would list the beliefs and values the Board is committed to and which will guide its behaviour at board meetings and in discussions among board members and between

the board and staff. This single page can also be shown to potential board members as part of the board recruitment and selection process and can be used as part of the annual board evaluation process.



Resources and references

[What Makes Great Boards Great - Harvard Business Review](#)