

Governance Fundamentals

Introduction to Generative Governance

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1 Adding Value: An Introduction to Generative Governance

“Generative governance” is a term used to describe a board that challenges itself, and the organization, to think outside the box and to explore topics in new and different ways. It is typically used by more established boards that have achieved a degree of competence in their fiduciary and strategic work. It is a mode of governance characterized by exploratory thinking and deeper analysis. In this mode the board works closely with management on the journey to become a high performance organization.

This section will address:

- The governance journey
- What are the characteristics of a generative mode of governance
- How does a board practice the generative mode of governance

1.1.1 The governance journey

Good governance is a journey. It does not just happen: it requires time, commitment, knowledge and a deliberate approach to building the competence of the governors individually and the board collectively. The building of governance expertise often

follows the organization's development through the phases of start-up, growth and maturation, as the governance needs of the organization are different at each stage of development.

Typically the governance journey begins with becoming proficient at fiduciary functions, and continues with the skills necessary to build strategic thinking which results in a strategic plan for the organization. These functions will always remain the foundation of an effective board.

The highest performing boards move on to assume a stronger leadership role - one where the board challenges itself, and the organization, to strive for higher levels of performance. To do this, the board needs to develop a culture of innovation and the space that is needed to explore innovative ways of thinking.

1.1.2 What are the characteristics of a generative mode of governance?

A culture of innovation involves:

- Getting the board to think outside the box
- Being open to new and different ways of doing things
- Support for experimentation
- A trusting environment
- Rewarding risk taking
- A commitment to ongoing learning
- A culture of inquiry
- A tolerance for ambiguity

These characteristics, which need to be developed over time, will create the environment for the board to work at innovative or generative dialogue.

Generative thinking builds on the fact that each person brings a unique way of thinking and of exploring information and this way of thinking needs to be brought to the fore. This is why it is important to have a board made up of individuals with different backgrounds and experiences.

1.1.3 How does a board practice the generative mode of governance?

Generative thinking requires a fusion of thinking among the board, clinical leadership and management rather than a division of labour. In this mode there are no clear lines of authority. It is everyone grappling together to make sense of an issue.

A board needs to create space to engage in generative thinking. This can involve devoting time at a board meeting or at a board retreat. Here are some approaches to consider:

- Select a topic that the organization is having difficulty with and which requires deeper understanding. For example, the FHT may have set a quality improvement plan goal to reduce patient wait times for appointments but the FHT has been unable to achieve this goal. Have someone prepare a short background paper on the issue absent any recommendations. Devote an hour of a board meeting to a discussion of the topic. The idea is to ensure that everyone understands the issue in the same way and that the group explores innovative ways of dealing with the issue. The chair plays a key role here in establishing the tone by indicating that it is not a decision making discussion, any idea is a good one and that the contributions of everyone are important.

These discussions are sometimes called ‘deep dives’, where sufficient time is devoted to making sure that everyone understands the issue and contributes ideas of possible new and different ways of dealing with the issue. The ideas discussed are summarized in a meeting note for further consideration.

Taking the pressure off the need to make a decision provides time to reflect on what is possible and can well lead to new and exciting ways of dealing with difficult issues.

- Catalytic questions are a good way of stimulating innovative thinking. Such questions open up thinking and can make an important contribution to discussions. Consider these questions for a one hour board discussion or a topic at a board retreat: What would it look like if we were a high performance organization? How would we behave? What would our results look like? How would our patients view us? How would we view ourselves? What would we need to do differently to become a high performance organization?

- Devoting quality time to discussing these questions, perhaps with the assistance of a facilitator, can be transformative.

This mode can also become an improved way of conducting the ongoing work of the board. It involves everyone becoming better at asking value add questions, airing and understanding divergent views, developing better insights and opportunities and making better decisions.



Resources and references

Chait, Ryan and Taylor, *Governance as Leadership: Reframing the Work of Nonprofit Boards*, John Wiley and Sons, 2005



Questions to consider

1. Has your board taken the time to talk about the bigger issues in the primary care sector or in the health care environment that may impact your FHT? If your board were to have this discussion, could you see it impacting strategic decisions around partners or services, for example? Or perhaps new or different roles for the organization or its staff?
2. Given the strict operating guidelines and rules that FHTs and NPLCs operate under, where might there be opportunities to be innovative? To establish stretch goals? To push the organization to new levels of performance?
3. Can you picture your board working in a generative mode? What do you feel you would need to do as a board and as board members to bring yourself to the point that you could feel comfortable working in it?