

Is It Time to Give Your Board a Check-up?

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A year ago you eagerly committed to serve as a board member of one of your favorite ministries. Four board meetings later, you are elected the board chair. You reluctantly accept the position, knowing board performance is at a low tide.

The average age of the board is 68. This is not surprising, since the bylaws do not provide for term limits. Some individuals have served for 15 to 20 years. A few of these individuals are high-energy contributors to the ministry—and then there are others. A self-evaluation of the board has never been performed. Your work is clearly cut out for you.

Board self-assessment can be a valuable learning tool that leads to greater achievement of an organization's mission. It can take a variety of formats—from soliciting feedback from individual board members about their contributions to the board's performance, to evaluating the effectiveness of time spent together as a board.

Helping the board understand the need for self-evaluation. Many board members have not participated in a self-assessment process. So, it will be important to help the board understand that the purpose of board self-evaluation is to individually and collectively improve board performance. The board undoubtedly expects staff to be periodically evaluated, so it is

only logical that the performance of the board should also be evaluated.

Other reasons to conduct a board self-assessment include:

- It's a valuable learning tool that can lead to greater achievement of an organization's mission.
- It can encourage individual board members to assess their own commitment and contributions to the ministry-governance process.
- It can lead to changes in governance structure or policies.
- It can provide valuable data

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for the governance/nominating committee on gifts and attributes desired in future board members.

- It can encourage celebration of team achievement when noticeable improvements are realized.

Overcoming the obstacles. It will be difficult for the board to initiate the process if the board chair is not convinced self-assessment is important. And, individual board members may offer reasons why a board self-

assessment is not needed. Here are some of the common objections: (1) “We don't have time for evaluation,” (2) “Our board does not have the capacity for self-evaluation,” (3) “It is unfair to subject volunteers to critical appraisal,” (4) “Evaluation methods are imprecise,” (5) “We've never done this before,” and (6) “If it ain't broke, don't fix it.”

Developing a self-evaluation pattern. One of the keys is to develop a cyclical pattern of board self-evaluations. Establish the self-evaluation frequency and place it on the board calendar so it routinely happens, just as you schedule CEO evaluations.

If the board is operating relatively well, perhaps a simple questionnaire or self-evaluative discussion at the end of each board meeting will suffice, e.g., things that went well during the meeting and areas of improvement for the next meeting. But in many situations, annual or biannual self-assessment is appropriate.

You may decide to mail the self-assessment documents to the board (this may be done anonymously) and have them returned for compilation by staff. Then, discuss the results with the entire board in an executive session. This discussion may give rise to action points that can be delegated to committees. If a board has never done a self-evaluation or has not done one recently, it may be necessary to spread out the issues over a number of board meetings.

One question often raised with board self-assessment is: “Should a consultant be used to lead the process?” Generally, a consultant is not required for a board self-assessment unless the board is in serious conflict.

Getting started. Many boards have never done a self-evaluation or, at least, not in recent years. If this is true of your board, consider approaching the self-evaluation in phases. Start by looking at the practices of the board as a whole, without focusing on individual directors.

Ask questions like:

- What is the board's role in developing the vision?
- Is it just rubber-stamping the recommendations of the CEO?
- Is the location and the physical set-up of board meetings conducive to quality deliberations?
- Are the right staff members in attendance?
- Do staff members attend appropriate portions of the meeting?
- How long has it been since the board read the bylaws?
- Are we complying with all aspects of the bylaws?
- Are there term and age limits for board members?
- Should there be term limits for board members?
- Should there be age limits for board members?
- What, if any, board procedures should be reviewed and possibly revised?
- How can our board performance be improved?
- Are we in compliance with ECFA Standards?

Before moving to the second level of board self-evaluation, decide who should lead this charge. It may be more appropriate for a board member other than the chairman to lead the board into this more in-depth

analysis of the performance of board members. Delegating the task to another board member with experience and/or gifts in this area is often a wise decision. If the board has a governance committee, this is an ideal assignment for this group. Otherwise, utilize a board member who would enjoy and be committed to this responsibility.

At this level, begin to have board members provide written responses to questions such as:

- How would you rate your level of preparation for board meetings?
- How would you rate your level of participation in meetings?
- What would enhance your individual performance as a board member?
- How would you describe the relationship between board and staff?

Level three might occur when the board has seen positive enhancements to board performance as a result of the first two phases. If results of the first two levels have not produced positive results, it is probably unwise to move to level three—it may be time to call in a consultant. The third level can be used to evoke comments about individual board performance and contributions to the governance process. Be sure to encourage positive attributes of board members as well as suggestions for how an individual board member might make a better contribution to the governance process.

Here are some ideas for this level:

1. Solicit written anonymous comments about each board member.

2. Have each board member commit to a goal, either by helping others on a committee to reach the goal or achieving the goal on their own. Share each member's or committee's goal with the rest of the board.

3. Then, in each meeting do a roundtable where each member reports on goal progress since the last meeting. This tends to reveal to everyone who might be deadwood. *Caution:* This process could be too long if you have a large board.

When the board engages in regular self-assessment, it contributes toward its own effectiveness. It also serves as an important catalyst for promoting and encouraging others throughout the organization to embrace processes that lead to improvement. 