



Best Practices in the Boardroom

5 Steps to More Effective and Accountable Leadership

By Warren Bird

We've all read too many sad stories of a church imploding. The scandal may vary—misuse of money, abuse of power, illicit sex, conflict of interest—but at some point in every mess, someone asks, "Why didn't the church board catch or prevent it?"

Actually, a lot of church boards are doing just that. They both guard against scandal and, more importantly, serve as a support and partner to their lead pastor. The board helps the church's mission grow in effectiveness and impact.

What do best-practice church boards look like? In recent months, the Evangelical Council for Financial

Accountability (ECFA) did major research of church boards and also of boards at Christ-centered nonprofits. The findings are free at ECFA.org/surveys.

Here, according to the research, are five of the most important steps you can take to improve the effectiveness and accountability on your church board.

1. Clarify Everyone's Role.

The biggest gap between effective and ineffective boards involves an understanding of who does what. The most telling survey question on the topic was this agree/disagree

statement: "As a board, we are clear on the role we are to play in helping lead this church forward and in what is expected of us." Among those who consider their board to be effective, 84% agreed, while among those who rate their board as ineffective, only 16% agreed. Combining all participants together, only 68% agreed.

This problem is easily solved by an intentional orientation of new members and ongoing training of the existing board. Sadly, only 39% of church board members agreed that they "regularly take time in our board meetings to train and equip our board toward greater effectiveness." One

easy pathway for ongoing training is to devote 5 to 10 minutes of each board meeting to reading and discussing a board-improvement book.

2. Focus on What's Important.

Church board agendas are like Steven Covey's story about trying to fit water, sand, small pebbles and fist-sized rocks all into a gallon jar. If you don't put the big rocks into the jar first, you may not get any of them in.

"This illustration applies to the board agenda," says ECFA President Dan Busby, co-author of *Lessons From the Church Boardroom*. "If we do not give priority to the 'big rock' issues, we will probably spend most of our time discussing minutiae."

One of our survey questions asked where the board is today on micro-management, and where the survey participant would like the board to be in the next 12 to 18 months. A solid 83% indicated that they wanted to do less micromanaging. One way to avoid micromanaging is with a well-planned agenda that focuses on big rocks and that also is clear about what the board is being asked to do with each rock. Every topic needs to be for one of three purposes: information, comment or action. If the latter, it should be presented with a well-thought-through recommended resolution.

3. Make Time for Soul Care.

The highest marks in our survey went to questions about the spiritual characteristics of a church board. Affirmations of various distinctives of Christ-centered governance each drew a score of almost 100%—with no distinction in those high ratings between the pastor, board chair and board members.

However, when we asked about

the board's role in the pastor's soul care, the responses were not nearly as high. The specific question, which drew only 56% agreement from all survey takers combined, was, "Our board chair or a designated board member regularly encourages our pastor to address 'soul care' topics in his or her life." The survey then defined soul care as "the responsibility to attend to the senior pastor's spiritual life, such as encouragement and accountability from the board that the senior pastor has regular times in the Word, prayer, reflection, taking a weekly day off, taking a full and uninterrupted vacation time each year, and following sound practices for personal accountability."

Worse, board members felt they were doing a better job with their pastor's soul care than the pastors felt. One solution is to ask the senior pastor if it would be OK for a designated member of the board regularly to pray for and ask about various issues named in the previous paragraph.

4. Have the Right Board Leadership.

Our survey asked, "When was the last time the board chair's performance was evaluated by the board?" The most common answer was "not for two or more years." Just maybe, the best person to lead the board is not currently serving as chair.

Likewise the number of boards where members have no term limits was surprisingly high. The advantages of having term limits are they create a system for developing new talent, they provide an off-ramp for an under-performing board member, and they help ensure that a board's composition is right for the challenges ahead.

Discussion of these topics should not come as a surprise on the board

agenda, but if they're regularly and appropriately addressed, your board will be more likely to thrive.

5. Be Prepared for Succession.

Succession is a fact of life. Your current pastor will one day be your former pastor.

A change of senior pastor always impacts the church board. Some boards have direct responsibility both to serve as search team and to oversee the transition. Others have lesser responsibilities, but every board needs to be ready for an emergency succession and a more intentional succession.

ECFA's survey asked, "When was the last time the board (in whole or in part) discussed succession planning for the senior pastor—whether an emergency plan, long-range succession or anything else?" The most common response was "not for two or more years."

You're Not Alone

The good news is that today more resources are available to help boards. ECFA offers a wide range of free downloads (see ECFA.church), and has published four new books on various aspects of excellence in governance.

As Dan Busby asks, "Would you trust a surgeon who stopped learning? An airline pilot who relied on outdated training? Lifelong learning is critical, especially for church leaders and board members who steward God's work."

Warren Bird, an Outreach magazine contributing editor, is the vice president of research at ECFA, former research director for Leadership Network and author of more than 30 books. For more: OutreachMagazine.com/Warren-Bird