

How to Move from an Operational to a Governance Board in Five “Easy” Steps

Use these tactics to create the crucial boundaries every board needs.

By Karen Eber Davis

If you have an operational board (where board members micromanage the staff’s work), you may have trouble moving to a governance board (where board members focus, as they should, on strategy and governance). But it’s vital to set boundaries on the board’s work, and that means creating a governance board.

The board’s rightful tasks are few. Board members should establish policies, select and evaluate the CEO, and provide high-level fiduciary oversight. They shouldn’t be running programs, planning events, or designing brochures.

But many nonprofits struggle to maintain a true governance board. When a nonprofit is just starting out, board members often jump in to help with daily tasks, and that may make sense at first. But it sets a bad precedence for the board as the nonprofit matures.

You may think you have the problem solved. You discuss the issue with board members, and they agree to focus only on strategy and governance issues. But later – perhaps even in the same meeting – they circle back to giving unsolicited advice on running programs, hiring staff, and the like.

Here’s how to reign in board members and create a governance board:

1. Keep a Tally. Be sure board members understand that they need to focus on governance. Clarify the differences between management and governance. Then, at each board meeting, have the chair ask a different board member to keep a running tally of the time spent on governance vs. management issues.

2. Check the Agenda. Boards want to give the help you need. Make sure you give them meat to chew. Fill the meeting agenda with policy and strategy issues, not management concerns.

3. Use Reminder Prompts. When we change behaviors, prompts help. Build reminders into your meetings. You might, for example, give everyone a red card to indicate “stop.” Invite members to pull out their card when the discussion meanders into operations.

4. Insist on Short Meetings. Strategy is hard work. Long sessions lead to tired people. Tired people get cranky. Cranky people dig into details, make poor decisions, and offend others. Don’t believe me? Notice when your meetings go negative. Note the time elapsed. Nine out of ten times, you’ve passed the hour mark.

5. Turn Board Members into Evaluators. Before you close meetings, ask the board to evaluate the process used. Rotate tactics. At meeting one, ask open-ended questions. At meeting two, request anonymous answers written on index cards. Next time, hand out a quick survey. (For your survey, use a Likert-type scale, and ask three or fewer questions. Be sure to include a variation of this question: What percent of the meeting did we spend on governance versus operations?)

Your challenge today: Pick one of the board-boundary behaviors above. Apply it at your next board meeting. 

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