

Good Governance: Board Engagement Needs a Boost Strategies to use in your monthly meetings

By Michael G. Daigneault
CEO of Quantum Governance, L3C

In a recent set of surveys conducted by my firm, Quantum Governance, L3C, only 42 percent of Board members across the United States thought their Boards were “effective” or “very effective” in engaging their directors. Sadly, this means more than 50 percent of directors said their Boards were only “adequate” or even “less than adequate” at engaging the full Board.

What is really going on at these nonprofits that is not engaging for a critical mass of Board members?

My team and I actually review hundreds of nonprofit Board agendas and meeting minutes annually. Based on this, I can understand why directors are walking away feeling less than fully engaged. Many agendas are fairly routine, with some opening remarks by the chair, a fairly detailed report by the Executive Director, followed by financial reports, committee reports and maybe (if you’re lucky) an update on the organization’s programs or strategic plan.

Reports, reports and more reports. The tone tends to be formal. Month to month, many agendas don’t vary much. The focus frequently tends to be on “telling” the Board information, providing fiduciary oversight and holding the nonprofit’s management “accountable.”

Sound familiar?

In other articles, I’ve encouraged you to expand your agendas beyond merely the fiduciary—to engage in strategic dialogue, early and often. But, let’s go further.

Let the tone of your Board meetings vary to include not only formal informational and oversight elements, but also genuinely engaging, persuasive and influential opportunities at the highest levels. (To be clear, I am not suggesting that the Board be invited to provide input at the operational or tactical level.)

Author Peter Senge provides a very helpful spectrum of the levels of dialogue in a meeting context:

- At the lowest level of engagement, he suggests that dialogue focuses on **telling** – telling the Board what has been done or what’s about to be done.

- At a slightly higher level of engagement he suggests that the focus shifts to **selling** – or advocating an idea to the Board.
- Higher on the engagement spectrum is the notion of **testing** – testing out an idea with the Board to identify its position.
- Beyond that, Senge urges that there be opportunities for what he terms **consulting** – or genuinely asking the Board’s opinion, with the idea of improving or modifying an idea.
- Lastly, and at the very highest level of engagement, he recommends discussions designed to encourage participants to **co-create** an idea or the key elements of an initiative.

Vary your agendas based on future needs and important trends. While there has to be some telling and selling, talk also about some element of your strategy each and every meeting. Make time to engage in authentic dialogue. Focus not only on the necessary elements of oversight – but also make sure questions are asked that invite input from Board members at the testing, consulting and – when appropriate – co-creating levels of engagement.

This means regularly engaging the Board in vision, mission and forward-looking questions that everyone knows will make a real difference as your nonprofit moves forward.

##

Michael Daigneault serves as Chief Executive Officer at Quantum Governance, L3C and has more than 30 years of experience in the field of governance, management, strategy, planning and facilitation. With more than 75 percent of Quantum Governance’s clients representing the nonprofit sector, the organization fields more engagements in that sector than any other.

Quantum Governance provides corporations, nonprofits, credit unions, associations and governmental entities with strategic, cost-effective governance, ethics and management consulting, facilitation and evaluation. We are home to more strategic governance experience than any other practice in the country. The firm is a unique L3C organization that integrates the best elements of both the for- and non-profit communities into one practice. It is a low-profit, limited-liability service organization dedicated to the public good and one of the very first such legal hybrid organizations in the United States.