The Essential Guide to High-Performing Boards
Introduction

Highly effective boards share a common set of traits that help them focus on what’s important, and work more efficiently to meet their goals.

Unfortunately, many boards suffer from challenges related to inadequate organizational structure, unhealthy team dynamics, ineffective communications, impaired access to information, and poor policy management and oversight.

But what does effective board governance look like in practice? Does it mean running better meetings? Thinking more strategically? Streamlining your policies? Strengthening your evaluation process?

This guide will give you the answers, and help you better understand:

- Roles and responsibilities of your governance team
- The importance of governance culture and the elements that comprise it
- Best practices for managing meetings, strategic planning, policies and evaluations
- How alignment brings all of this work together
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Your Governance Team: Roles and Responsibilities

In order for boards and CEOs/superintendents to successfully move an organization forward, they must be able to effectively communicate and connect, while keeping aligned with the organization’s strategic direction. However, this can only happen if all parties clearly understand their roles and responsibilities within the organization’s overall structure.

At the very basic level, boards are responsible for ensuring that the CEO/superintendent is carrying out the organization’s mission in a responsible way, while the CEO/superintendent is in charge of running daily operations, with board direction as a guide. Here’s a quick rundown of some key board and governance team responsibilities.

The board of directors is responsible for ensuring that the organization fulfills its mission. The board provides strategic direction and oversight of the organization through strategic planning, policy development, financial oversight and evaluation of the CEO/superintendent. High-performing boards also understand the value and importance of evaluating their own work.

The principal role of the board chair is to manage and to provide leadership to the board of directors. The board chair is accountable to the board and acts as a direct liaison between the board and management of the organization, through the CEO/superintendent.

The CEO/superintendent reports directly to the board and is responsible for administering the implementation of policy established by the board and carrying out the day-to-day operations of the organization, including leading staff to operate within budget to execute both strategic and operational plans.

The board secretary’s main responsibility is to manage all board documentation, and ensure that information is updated, accurate and properly stored. The secretary is responsible for recording and reviewing meeting minutes, and sending out notices for board and committee meetings.

Whether a board moves to a higher level of strategic governance will require new understandings, with presidents [CEOs/superintendents] who are open and willing to partner with their boards, and with boards that demonstrate they comprehend the task ahead. ("The 10 Habits of Highly Effective Boards," Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, 2014)
**Developing a High-Performing Governance Culture**

Governance culture is comprised of the underlying beliefs and values that provide guidance and direction for board conduct and decision-making. Although your governance board might have additional values defined, the most effective governance team exhibit at least the five key elements shown below.

1. **Trust**
   Efffective boards are open and transparent, both inside and outside of the boardroom. Encouraging the healthy exchange of differing viewpoints among members, conducting fair and constructive leadership and self-assessment evaluations, and communicating openly with the community are all important ways to build trust.

2. **Teamwork**
   Working together to accomplish strategic objectives begins with respect—not only between individual board members, but between the board and the organization’s leadership. Promote teamwork and avoid power struggles by making sure that everyone clearly understands their individual and collective board roles.

3. **Collaboration**
   When stakeholders can share their knowledge quickly and easily, regardless of whether or not they’re in the same room, they can better come up with collaborative solutions. Increase collaboration by giving stakeholders the ability to exchange information and record ideas in a central location, so they can access discussions and materials at any time.

4. **Ethics**
   Effective boards have a written code of ethics that members should agree to enforce while carrying out board responsibilities. Ethics covers behavior relating to disclosure, fiduciary responsibility, standards of conduct, conflict of interest and confidentiality, among others. This documentation should be made easily available to all stakeholders for reference should the need arise.

5. **Communication**
   Good communication is the foundation for building trust between board members, between board and CEO/superintendent, and between the board and community. Be sure stakeholders have access to the latest plans, policies and other documentation to ensure transparency and informed decision-making.

“Effective school boards lead as a united team with the superintendent, each from their respective roles, with strong collaboration and mutual trust.”

(Eight characteristics of effective school boards, Center for Public Education, 2011.)

88% of directors on the most effective boards say there is a culture of trust and respect in the boardroom, compared to only 39 percent of those on ineffective boards.

Meetings

Unproductive meetings cost organizations time and money, so proper meeting planning, execution and follow-up are important first steps in getting the right things done in an efficient, cost-effective way. Boards that have the most impact on organizational success follow a set of best practices around meeting management. Get the most out of your meetings with this simple checklist.

Before the Meeting

☐ Plan your agenda.
When planning your agenda, use your strategic plan as your guide. Many boards go months without meeting or spend hours in meetings discussing things that have nothing to do with the organization’s strategic initiatives. High-performing boards focus valuable face-to-face time on issues that most closely tie to their organizational goals. A board management software package that integrates your strategic plan and meetings can make this process easier by allowing you to quickly mark which strategic initiative each agenda item supports.

☐ Communicate with participants.
Give participants access to meeting agendas and supporting documents well before the meeting so they can review and record questions or comments they’d like to discuss. Rather than sending out expensive paper copies that could be misplaced or become quickly outdated, many executive and school boards opt to upload everything to their board management software so everyone always has the latest versions of board documents, and members can add comments directly in their personal online agendas to quickly reference during the meeting.

During the Meeting

☐ Use your time wisely.
Make the most of the short time you have with your board by not only beginning and ending the meeting on time, but by sticking to the agenda as closely as possible. Assign a time limit to each agenda item to be sure you cover what’s needed, and park non-urgent issues until the next meeting. Make sure participants follow proper Parliamentary procedure to keep the meeting orderly and discussions focused.

☐ Take good notes.
Be sure minutes and votes are properly recorded, additional documentation uploaded, and action items are clearly assigned to their owners — all within one central location so participants can quickly access later. When busy board members can view this information remotely on their tablet or smart phone, they’re less likely to miss any important details, and more likely to stay engaged.

After the Meeting

☐ Share updates with stakeholders.
Update internal and external stakeholders on board discussions and decisions. Instead of wasting time with emails and attachments, effective boards simply refer people to their online board management software to get the latest information, adjusting permissions so they can be sure they’re displaying the right information to the right groups.

☐ Follow up on assigned action items.
Effective meetings result in collaborative decision-making and proper follow-up on identified action items. Having a process for documenting action and assignment of tasks and deadlines allows meeting attendees to spend more time on things that matter most.
Forsyth County Schools saves $15,000 each year in paper and personnel costs for the Georgia school system’s board and leadership meetings. Their secret? Better board management, and the software to support it.

How should you spend your meeting time?

69% of directors on the most effective boards say they effectively adjust strategy on a continuous basis. Only 2% of directors on ineffective boards say the same.


Forsyth County Schools
Anatomy of a board plan

Every strategic plan should be approached with an eye on continuous improvement for both the board and the organization as a whole.

Components of the plan should include:

1. Mission, Vision and Beliefs
2. Analysis of Current Organizational State
3. Strategic Goals and Priorities
4. Performance Objectives and Measures
5. Initiatives and Actions

Board planning should be focused on strategic initiatives, while leaving day-to-day operational planning to the CEO/superintendent and their staff. Strategic planning involves setting a direction for the organization, defining goals and identifying the strategies needed to meet those goals. Operational planning, on the other hand, outlines the resources, timelines and tasks needed to carry out those strategies. This is an important distinction to make to ensure that your board doesn’t get caught up in micromanagement or waste time dealing with issues better handled by management.

Strategic plans provide the board and the organization’s leadership team with a guide to help them make important decisions. They also provide a starting point for monitoring progress to ensure a culture of continuous improvement. Throughout the planning process, boards should find the most efficient way to engage community members and promote transparency by sharing draft plans and inviting input.
Mission, Vision and Beliefs
Who are we? While the mission statement states the primary purpose of the organization, the vision statement includes a sense of direction and typically provides a glimpse into corporate values and beliefs.

Analysis of Current Organizational State
Where are we now? Before making plans for the future, it's important to look at current performance and financial status, conduct a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis, and gather input from stakeholders on how they view the organization. The most effective boards use data like this to inform decisions around goals and priorities.

Strategic Goals and Priorities
Where do we want to go? At this stage, your board will identify strategic goals or areas and priorities that the organization needs to focus on to achieve its mission. This provides clarity for the board, staff and stakeholders around the strategic focus of the organization.

Performance Objectives and Measures
How will we know when we have arrived? For each strategic goal, specific performance objectives, including specific performance measures and targets should be identified to give clarity to the desired outcomes that are to be accomplished through the plan. It can be helpful to stakeholders to view these measures and outcomes through tools like a Balanced Scorecard.

Initiatives and Actions
How do we plan to get there? In this step of the planning process, the organization defines specific actions needed to meet the performance objectives. To ensure these actions are accomplished, they should be tied to a specific person, identify cost implications and assigned expected completion dates. Through board management software, staff can provide progress reports on these items and board meeting agendas can be linked to them. The National Council of Nonprofits recommends the same:

“A good way to keep your nonprofit’s board engaged is to tie the nonprofit’s strategic initiatives to the agenda for board meetings, and to include a short discussion about some part of the nonprofit’s strategic directions in every board meeting agenda.”

Simbi’s strategic planning software is a state-of-the-art tool that will strategically connect plan management, performance measurement and communication in a powerful package to help school systems improve student achievement. It is the most powerful electronic suite of board management tools available to school districts.

Scott Cowart, superintendent of Carroll County Schools (Georgia)
Policies

Boards adopt, revise and follow policies that guide and govern their work, ensure compliance with external agencies, and minimize issues that would otherwise distract them from strategic initiatives. Policies should be aligned to the strategic plan in order to foster accountability and promote efficiency within an organization.

Effective boards ensure that policies are readily available to all stakeholders in one central location, such as a board management software package, so that everyone has the latest updates. Easy access keeps community members in the loop, while board members can quickly refer to online policies if they need guidance on topics like meeting preparation or how to handle community inquiries.

The Policy Process

- Board solicits and gathers recommendations from the CEO/superintendent on proposed policies
- Board posts proposed policies for public review and comment
- Board votes to adopt or reject policies
- Board holds CEO/superintendent accountable for policy implementation

Who’s Responsible?

Board

Policies around fiduciary responsibility, community and stakeholder engagement, organizational effectiveness, and continuous improvement.

CEO/Superintendent

Administer the implementation of policy established by the board and establish necessary administrative regulations or procedures to carry out board policies.

Our policy review process is organized, everything is in one place, it is historical and archived, and the information does not get lost in never-ending chains of emails. And now the Board has access to all their governing documents in one easily accessible location.

Kathy Meyers, board secretary, Grandview Board of Education (Missouri)
Board Self-Assessment

Boards that routinely assess their own performance are more likely to increase their effectiveness over time. Surprisingly, not all boards conduct these types of assessments. Research shows that 36 percent of nonprofit boards never evaluate their own performance.*

The purpose of the board self-assessment is to discuss successes and identify areas for growth. Board self-assessments could cover areas such as the ability to access information, how well members collaborate, board composition and effectiveness in developing strategy. Although you should choose the evaluation tool that best fits your organization, working with a model like Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a good place to start.

**Appreciative Inquiry**

AI focuses on building board strengths, rather than emphasizing weaknesses, in order to drive improvement. The model is based on a series of questions designed to uncover the board’s most successful experiences so those strengths can be called on when facing future challenges.

**Evaluations**

Evaluations and assessments are important instruments for holding boards and organizational leaders accountable for sustained improvement. High-performing boards conduct a variety of evaluations, and link them with policy and performance measures within their strategic plan to ensure that work aligns with goals and objectives.

No matter which kind of evaluation your board conducts, there are certain elements that should be included in the process, including gathering supporting evidence, creating action plans for improvement and providing feedback and opportunities for improvement.

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CEO/Superintendent Evaluation or Annual Performance Review

One of the most important roles of the board is to ensure the sustainability of the organization by holding leadership accountable for performance and compliance with board policies. When conducting leadership evaluations, boards should strive to develop a process that encourages organizational improvement while promoting leadership growth. By working together on this process, effective boards and CEOs/superintendents ensure fairness, while taking the opportunity to strengthen their relationship.
There is no one method to evaluate a CEO/superintendent.

However, there are suggested best practices to help guide your governance team. Aim to establish a process that promotes organizational improvement, while providing professional development and growth opportunity.

The board that fully understands its governance role will see four compelling reasons for conducting regular CEO/superintendent evaluations:

1. A means for ensuring accountability
2. An opportunity to strengthen the board-CEO/superintendent relationship
3. A structured way for the board to impact CEO/superintendent professional development
4. As a tool in determining salary and contract considerations

Simbli provides us with the perfect tool to ensure that all of our work is aligned. For example, the system was able to link policies, meetings, and the system improvement plan to the SACS/AdvancED standards and indicators in preparation for our external review. The External Review Team was very impressed with the accessibility of information as well as the alignment of the work.

Dr. Jason Branch, superintendent, Oconee County Schools (Georgia)
The CEO/Superintendent Evaluation Process

1. Schedule the Evaluation
   Determine the best time during the year to conduct the annual performance review, and mark it on the calendar.

2. Build the Instrument
   One year before the annual performance review, the board and CEO/superintendent should craft the language to express expectations and goals. This should be a collaborative process, owned by the full board and CEO/superintendent. The mutually agreed upon instrument should be formalized in writing at the beginning of the evaluation period.

   ⊗ Agree on Expectations
     Devise categories within which the CEO/superintendent’s performance will be measured. The following categories may provide a useful framework (Eadie, 2005):
     - Board-CEO/superintendent relations
     - Implementation of the organization’s strategic plan
     - Organizational leadership and management
     - Community (external) relations

   ⊗ Agree on Indicators
     The board and CEO/superintendent should agree on the evidence required to demonstrate achievement of goals or fulfillment of board expectations.

   ⊗ Determine the Rating Scale to be Used

Superintendent Evaluation Samples

It always helps to learn the ropes from someone who’s been there. If you’re just getting started with evaluations, or need some extra guidance, these sample superintendent evaluations are a great resource.

Developed by boards of education, state school board associations, and state departments of education, each sample includes instructions, suggested supporting documentation and rubrics you can use in your own leadership evaluations.

Contact us to learn more
Evaluations

Conduct the Annual Performance Review

In the annual performance review, the board compares the CEO/superintendent’s results with the board’s expectations. One year prior, the board and CEO/superintendent will have already reached a clear agreement on and documented the instrument and process to be used.

Best Practices

1. The CEO/superintendent presents to the board his or her own self-assessment. The CEO/superintendent should provide evidence of tangible progress toward expectations.

2. Individual board members complete the evaluation, and results are collected and compiled by the board chair.

3. The board meets to discuss and come to a consensus regarding the CEO/superintendent’s performance. Ratings are compiled into a single document.

4. The board chair meets with the CEO/superintendent to present the final evaluation.

5. The CEO/superintendent meets with the entire board to hear all points of view. If board members disagree about performance, they should express their opinions. However, the board chair should remind everyone that the CEO/superintendent will be expected to follow the majority.

6. A written summary of the evaluation should be given to the CEO/superintendent with a copy retained by the board in a confidential “CEO/superintendent’s personnel file.”

7. If the evaluation instrument or process needs to be updated to reflect additional or modified expectations as well as updated goals, this is the time to do so.

While this describes the annual formal evaluation process, boards are encouraged to also engage in a less formal, semi-annual evaluation.
Aligning the work

Because boards and management both have multiple areas of responsibility, it can be easy to get caught up in issues that don’t contribute to the organization’s strategic direction. This is why the highest-performing boards align all of their work — from meetings to evaluations — with strategic goals, so they can be sure they’re getting the right things done.

“Simbli has been instrumental in our efforts in managing, streamlining and aligning the work of our district at both the system and school levels. It is our one-stop communication tool.”

Dr. Wanda Creel, superintendent

Barrow County Schools
Summary

As you can see, high-performing boards keep strategy at the center of everything they do, and ensure that all of their work — including meetings, planning, policies and evaluations — are aligned with that strategy.

But it's impossible to achieve alignment without the right tools. This is where a comprehensive board management solution can be invaluable. In order for your board to perform at its highest level, you'll need a solution that makes it easy to manage all of the different components covered in this guide, not just one or two.

With a holistic approach to board work, and a comprehensive toolset to help you streamline it all, your board will soon join the ranks of those that consistently outperform the rest.
Simbli is the only comprehensive board governance software on the market today. Simbli includes integrated modules that help boards maximize productivity, bringing together meetings, planning, policies and evaluations into one, easy-to-use board management software solution — all accessible with a single login.

Meetings
Streamline meeting agenda preparation and provide easy and secure access to meeting materials. Tie agenda items to policies, and components of your strategic plan to keep your board focused on what's important.

Planning
Build and align board work around your strategic plan. Get the right things done by ensuring that everyone can quickly access your plan and see how their own work in meetings, policies and evaluations align back to the plan.

Policies
Develop, communicate and collaborate on policies and procedures in real time. Link policies to evaluations, meeting agenda items and elements of your strategic plan, ensuring that your board is fully informed.

Evaluations
Ensure continuous improvement by assessing the health of your board, organization and individual leaders. Link evaluations with specific items in your strategic plan, or policies for easy access to documented evidence.

Documents
Make misplaced documents a thing of the past with Simbli’s Documents software. Simbli’s online library provides a central repository for all of your important board documents, with permissions to allow board members, staff and the public to access exactly what they need while keeping sensitive data secure.

Communications
Communicate with your board and the public without having to rely on your technical team to update your website, or worrying about lost emails. With Simbli’s online portal, you can streamline communications with all stakeholders, creating separate channels for internal and public viewers, including customized news feeds and calendars — all searchable by date or keyword.

Find out how your board can join the ranks of today’s highest-performing boards. Contact us today for a free demonstration of Simbli Board Management Software.

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