



7 RULES OF VIRTUAL BOARD ENGAGEMENT

BY DOTTIE SCHINDLINGER

Dottie is the Governance Technology Evangelist and a founding team member of BoardEffect



For a board to be effective, it must first be engaged. Specifically, board members must actively and productively participate in the work of governing. This is absolutely vital in today's work environment, which has seen an abrupt and potentially lasting switch to a virtual sphere. Within this setting, boards have a harder job than ever before. When board performance expectations are higher, the most desirable board candidates have the least time, and strategic decision-making must be done either partly or entirely in a remote work environment – engagement is crucial.

But what does true virtual board engagement look like, and how do boards know when they achieve it? Board engagement is part art and part science, and it never ends. Rather, it is a fluid process, but with discrete components and steps. This guide offers frameworks and best practices (“7 Rules”) to aid board administrators, executives and directors in their efforts toward the elusive goal of engaging and elevating the effectiveness of boards from a virtual perspective.

BOARD ENGAGEMENT TIPS FOR VIRTUAL MEETINGS



- Organizations need strong leadership under all circumstances.** It's critical that the board chair and chief executive director commit to talking – daily if needed – until they create a clear plan to get the board's attention focused on addressing the needs of your organization.
- Plan your agenda carefully.** For many, the default approach is to simplify virtual meetings and make a one-way flow of information – but your board is your governing partner during a crisis, and you need to plan for engagement. Rather than trying to cover all topics on an informative level, choose those that are most mission critical and could benefit from board participation.
- Use BoardEffect's collaboration tools in conjunction with the videoconference.** BoardEffect provides convenient ways for your board, committees, and other groups to meet in private “workrooms,” and to collaborate through Group Discussions, sharing files in Group Libraries, participating in Group Polls and Surveys, and facilitating Group Meetings. When used with videoconferencing software, these options help shrink the physical distance between members of the group by making it easy to get feedback, brainstorm, share files and ideas, and hold meetings.

1. IDENTIFYING THE CYCLE

The work of boards is complex, demanding and high-stakes. It is also cyclical in nature. Boards convene on a regular meeting cycle, deliver on a recurring set of annual responsibilities, and continuously work in a development cycle to refresh and strengthen themselves as strategic assets to the organizations they serve. This board development cycle includes three distinct areas of focus, including: (a) planning and recruitment, (b) orientation and onboarding, and (c) evaluation and retention.

Recruitment follows, which leads to onboarding, which when done right leads to board engagement, which ensures strong retention. There is a great deal of emphasis placed on the recruitment and election of new members, but less so on the other areas. Also, contrary to popular opinion, these are not episodic initiatives. Rather, board development never ends, with board member engagement naturally and intrinsically woven into every part of that cycle. Today, the responsibility for setting and keeping that cycle in motion rests with the board's governance committee.

2. RETHINKING THE NOMINATING COMMITTEE

Once a staple among a majority of boards, the "nominating committee" is increasingly becoming passé. In its place, fully-fledged "governance" or "board development" committees have emerged. The governance committee is an updated, expanded, and empowered next generation of the nominating committee. The governance committee is charged with overseeing the ongoing development and engagement of board members, ensuring that governance is happening effectively, and taking steps to remediate gaps. Irrespective of its name, every health care organization needs a committee that concentrates exclusively on that overarching purpose, asking such questions as:

- Given our strategic plan, do the bylaws still make sense? Will they support or hinder achieving our goals?
- What does the board see as its primary purpose, and is that purpose explicitly being adhered to?
- What are the board's opportunities and constraints? What education or information should be provided to help the board take advantage of the opportunities and minimize the constraints?
- Who are the right players to make the right things happen and provide the right guidance to the CEO? How can we ensure the right mixture of talents, experience, demographics and personalities on our board?

3. RECRUITING FOR ENGAGEMENT

The governance committee is charged with determining what types of board members need to be at the table over the next three to five years, as well as deciding which candidates can best address the most important issues the organization will face. To optimize downstream member engagement, boards need to be specific about the talents they seek. They should first ask “What is our primary purpose, and what do we need to accomplish?” and then communicate those needs, as would be the case for any other job.

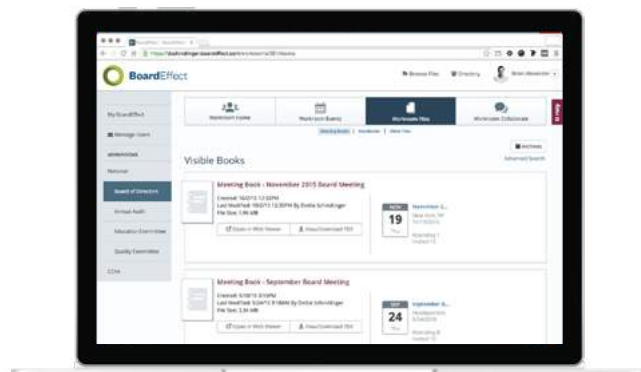
The governance committee should create specific profiles for the board members it seeks (as well as for current directors) to make it easy for the right candidates to emerge. Understanding the mixture of skill sets, experiences and mindsets of current and potential directors is critical to creating the right board “team.” And, as new directors’ skills are matched with the organization’s most pressing needs, deeper engagement among all board members will likely follow.

Leverage Technology for Orientation & Training

“We were able to complete orientation and training via our [BoardEffect] platform. We sent one message to direct new board members into the platform, rather than having to communicate back and forth throughout the process, and they were able to access all the info they needed in advance.”

Becky Wolf

Director of Finance, Draper Holdings



4. ORIENT FOR THE JOURNEY



New directors should be provided with a thorough orientation program – one that allows board members to engage in as much self-directed discovery as possible, and steadily come up-to-speed with the board’s work and the specific ways they can add value. Additionally, assign each newcomer a “board buddy” or mentor with whom questions and advice about how to fit into the board can be discussed. That mentor does not necessarily need to be a current board member. Having a director who may have just rotated off the board serve as a mentor, with support from the organization’s staff not only helps a new director gain comfort in the role but retains the past director’s engagement as well.

As new directors complete their orientation and take on more responsibilities, effective engagement also depends on not overwhelming them with too much information at once. If the organization has an online board portal, proposed meeting topics can be posted there before each meeting, whether in person or virtual, along with a survey asking directors which topics they consider the highest priority for discussion and which ones could be covered by a written report. Asking board members what they want to talk about engages the entire board in thinking about the content for the meeting, and helps reduce the potential for board members to mentally “check out” during meetings. Especially during a virtual meeting, it can be easy to turn off the camera, go on mute and handle business around the house instead of actively contributing to the discussion. Engaging the board in planning the content for the meeting also increases the likelihood that directors will review the full agenda and all reports in advance, and will be better prepared to have meaningful discussions.

Boost Engagement for Virtual Meetings with the Right Tools

“This [virtual environment] has really forced our board members to get on [BoardEffect], see the materials, look at the meeting books, look at the handbooks – and [to ultimately] be more of a participant in these meetings. We’re seeing a lot more participation. It’s been great.”

Chelsea Barber

Executive Assistant/Officers and Directors Coordinator,
State Bar of Texas

5. PARTNERING FOR SUCCESS

A strong partnership between the CEO and the board chair is vital to the entire board's engagement, particularly when carrying out determined protocol and support for virtual meetings. Regular conversations and candid communication establish mutual trust, helping both leaders support and get to know each other as individuals. Their relationship sets the stage for a shared governance model, the most effective way to achieve full board engagement.

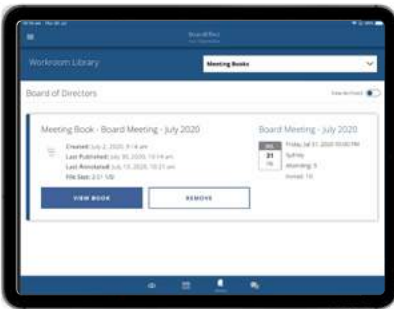
It's also important for board members to personally connect—in effect, build a relationship—with the organization in the context of their work. Setting aside a few minutes at each board meeting for director-led “mission moments” – where a board member shares a story or example of one way the organization is meeting its mission – is a great way to start building these connections. For example, the board might invite directors to look into a topic or attend an event, in-person or virtual, outside their area of expertise. Each would then relate what they have learned about the organization's mission and relevance through the experience, tapping into a shared passion and enthusiasm for the organization's work that become contagious. Such activities engage all board members in both building relationships and thinking about what the organization's mission really means – to them individually, to the board collectively, and to the broader community.

6. SHARING FOR BALANCE

Sharing perspectives that come from varied backgrounds and experiences also speaks to the importance of board diversity, another factor that fosters greater trustee engagement. In a more diverse group, people behave differently. They tend to dive deeper into topics, which often leads to better conversations and decision-making on behalf of the organization's varied stakeholders.

It is also important for boards to have a balance of personality types among their members. They cannot all be visionaries. Boards need some who say, “Let's get it done” and others who say, “Let's deliberate.” They also need those who want to start something new, and those who want to vote and move on. Boards need all types, but at the end of the day, they need people who are working really hard to make good decisions, for whom “easy” is not good enough.

7. CODIFYING FOR ACCOUNTABILITY



To ensure everyone is clear on where and how to focus their efforts, boards might consider having each member sign an annual agreement with a written set of expectations and goals—a “contract” that speaks to the individual director’s expertise and passions, as well as the organization’s needs. An annual contract provides clarity and guidance for directors and the organization alike, allowing everyone to openly ask, “Are we getting what we want from each other and our work?” The clearer board members are about what they want from the board and what the board needs from them, the more fully engaged members can be.

To ensure a high level of engagement an annual board assessment is required. The governance committee should own the task of helping the board evaluate its purpose and priorities annually, along with facilitating each director’s self-evaluation of individual performance. The results – analyzed in summary and compared to the standards set by the strategic plan, board development plan, and director annual “contracts” – can help identify the board’s development opportunities for the following year. An annual board retreat is the ideal time for board members to discuss the results of both evaluations, but if a physical retreat is not possible, setting a full day or two for a virtual retreat can be just as effective and ensure that time is being dedicated to a thorough review of performance.

Set an Effective Process for Board Self-Evaluations

“We recently conducted a board self-evaluation survey on BoardEffect, and it was easy to use. The function enabled us to develop quickly a professional looking report on results that included the details we needed.”

JoAnn Cragoe

Executive Assistant to the President, American Public Media

CONCLUSION

Boards must rise to the challenge and develop creative, innovative approaches to helping their members become engaged, even before their first meeting, and stay engaged throughout their board service. Boards can no longer afford to have members follow a traditional board development timeline: a term to learn, a term to do, a term to lead. Directors need to make a contribution on day one, but to do that they need to understand what is expected of them and be given lots of opportunities for engagement in board work. These 7 Rules will help you navigate the fluid, yet rigorously demanding, landscape of engaging your board toward effective leadership.

Dottie Schindlinger is executive vice president and founding team member of BoardEffect, a Philadelphia- based board management software company.

She can be reached at dschindlinger@boardeffect.com

CONTACT US TODAY

+1-866-966-4987

info@boardeffect.com

UNITED STATES

111 West 33rd St
16th Floor
New York, NY
10001

UNITED KINGDOM

1-3 Strand
London
WC2N 5EH,
UK

AUSTRALIA

Suite 01, Level 46
MLC Centre,
19 Martin Place
Sydney NSW 2000