

A High-Performance Board

Nudging your board toward improved performance

BY MIKE LETCHER, ICMA-CM

As a consultant who has worked with many governing boards, I have seen firsthand how buzzwords like “high-performance organization,” “six sigma,” and “priority-based budgeting” are insignificant if a board is not performing effectively. While these concepts can improve organizational performance, a board’s effectiveness remains critical in governance and overall operational performance. So, how can you nudge your board toward improved performance?

The key to starting the board on its journey toward better performance is by providing a simple but effective roadmap that guides their efforts. Over the last decade, while working with governing boards across the country, I have identified four key factors that contribute to developing high-performance boards (HPBs): teamwork, expectations for executive leadership and operations, strategic focus, and evaluating board and executive effectiveness and results. Let’s explore these factors and why they are essential.

Teamwork is essential for any elected board to work together effectively. From my experience, it’s illuminating to see how boards lack trust in some members, leading to a cascading set of issues that results in avoiding conflict, not holding each other accountable, and other problems, which are covered in Patrick Lencioni’s book, *Five Dysfunctions of a Team*. When confidentially surveyed, the

boards I have worked with over the years have provided a litany of issues and problems with their teamwork, along with solutions for improving it. Once these issues or impediments to their effectiveness are identified, the hard work of addressing them starts.

Before discussing how to address their teamwork issues, I use a simple icebreaker for the board to get to know each other on a personal level. Surprisingly, even though they meet frequently as a board, they often do not know each other well. The discussion revolves around how they were raised, who their hero is, their hobbies, what they are passionate about, and more. It’s not an easy conversation, but in the end, it sets the stage for building trust to tackle the more difficult subject of teamwork. The ensuing discussions are not merely an exchange of information between board members, but uncovering a deeper connection with one another through their shared interests.

For some organizations, the roles of the board and manager become unclear and difficult to define. The lack of clarity within these roles can result in a disconnect that impacts teamwork and the ability to deliver results for the community. The ideal role of the elected public board is to develop public policy while leaving the implementation of that policy and the responsibility for day-to-day organizational operations to the manager.



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So, why does this create friction between the roles?

The answer is simple: friction occurs when we've neglected to establish the expectations that the board has for its manager. How can any employee function effectively if they don't know what their supervisor expects of them? Conversely, the supervisor should know what the employee expects of them to perform their job. It is this shared set of expectations that provides the clarity needed for teamwork. Oftentimes, the charter does not define how the board and manager can set these expectations to work together more effectively. In our experience, once clear expectations on the outcomes of the roles of the board and manager have been set, boards begin to recognize the value proposition of letting the manager do his or her job.

"Managing the horizon" is a beautiful phrase coined by Peter Senge in his bestselling book, *The Dance of Change*. So who should set the strategic direction to manage the horizon, the board or manager? In my consulting journeys, we've found push and pull between the

manager and the board over this simple question. In some cases, strategic plans are driven entirely by the manager, while in other cases, the board plays a pivotal role. The key is to focus on the interdependence between the board and management. It's all about developing and adopting a strategic plan that aligns the priorities of both.

Figure 1 shows four characteristics that we have determined that high-functioning boards have in common: teamwork, expectations, strategic focus, and evaluation. The chart serves as a compass for your board to evaluate the four characteristics of HPBs based on their current state and what desired future state they would like to achieve. Once any deficits are identified, the board can develop plans to move toward improved governance.

To learn more about building an HPB, join us for the "Building High Performing Board-Manager Relations" micro-certificate course at the 2023 ICMA Annual Conference in Austin, Texas, on September 30, 2023. **PM**

Figure 1

High-Performance Board Characteristic	Definition	Present Situation	Desired Future State	Deficiency	Action Plan/Steps
Teamwork	The board works together effectively and addresses any issues that impede collaboration.				
Expectations for Executive Leadership, Operations, and Board Support	The board has identified key day-to-day and leadership expectations for the manager and how they will support the manager.				
Strategic Focus	The board, in collaboration with the manager, has developed a strategic plan.				
Evaluation of Board and Executive Effectiveness and Results	The board annually evaluates its HPB efforts and, if necessary, makes any adjustments to improve governance.				