Change for the Better
The skills and tools new board members need to thrive

By Beth Ingram

Health care governance education transformed immeasurably for the better during my 36-year career with the Arkansas Hospital Association. Almost four decades ago, board members were chosen for their prominence in the community. They met and enjoyed a nice lunch or dinner on the third Thursday of each month; discussed hospital issues for an hour or two, and then went home. However, as health care laws and regulations grew more restrictive, governance leaders saw their roles change as well.

Today, as health care CEOs and boards think about replacing board positions, they look for many perspectives from the new member. For instance, they may want a new member to be from outside the community, someone to represent the diverse population of their community, a nurse or physician with a clinical background, someone from manufacturing who is familiar with quality and safety goals, a banking or investments manager — the list is endless.

Prior to attending monthly board meetings, trustees now visit the health care organization’s online board portal or review the board packet mailed prior to the meeting. There they should find all of the “consent agenda” items to review, along with reports, surveys, special items to be discussed (i.e., potential construction, new equipment, expanded services, etc.) and financial documents that will be reviewed in detail at the meeting. In other words, homework is required.

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Board members will want to show the community that they support the organization’s mission by contributing financially to the hospital’s foundation on an annual basis, while soliciting other donors as well. CEOs should offer several convenient methods by which board members may contribute. In addition, board members should make an effort to support hospital fundraising activities, such as annual galas, luncheons/dinners and auctions.

Applying New Knowledge
From my perspective, I’m seeing how drastically governance issues and education have changed. For about 25 years, I was responsible for governance education at the Arkansas Hospital Association. Each year, we offered at least one educational conference, one dinner meeting held in four or five regions of the state, and online individual board certification, along with a quarterly newsletter — all geared specifically to health care governance leaders.

For speaker and topic ideas, I read everything I could get my hands on — articles, newsletters, books and websites — and participated in state and national governance conferences and webinars. Additionally, I found that education departments in other state hospital associations are always willing to share governance education successes and new ideas that might appeal to board members.

That educational knowledge led to my joining the board of the largest hospice system in the state soon after my retirement last year from the Arkansas Hospital Association. Today, I am able to use what I have learned from all that reading, networking and conference attendance, and I’m pleased to see firsthand how much the education that we provided at the association can really benefit board members.

The well-organized orientation for my new fellow board members with the hospice organization’s CEO and executive staff was informative and
most appreciated. While the organization does not use a board portal, the quarterly board packet arrives by mail after an email announcement that it will be forthcoming.

Board meetings offer a consent agenda, an educational session, and interesting and timely items to be discussed and voted on by the board. Meetings last two hours to be considerate of each member’s schedule. In addition, I joined the board’s Public Policy Committee, which educates key advocacy groups and elected officials on hospice and palliative care issues, as well as encouraging positive policy decisions on behalf of the organization and the hospice community.

**Sharing a Commitment**
Reflecting on the changes in governance I witnessed during my career, I understand that practically all of them were for the better. To make a valuable contribution to their organizations, today’s board members must be committed to sustaining the following practices:
- Continuous learning both inside and outside the boardroom.
- A willingness to prepare for committee and board meetings.
- A willingness to participate in board discussions and ask tough questions.
- Being engaged as a board member at full board meetings and by serving on board committees.
- Supporting the organization financially and actively recruiting other donors.
- Sharing ideas for potential new board members who represent the community.

And, to maintain the higher levels of performance that boards must continually strive for, they will need to look for new board members who share the same dedication and commitment.

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