

A Trustee Checklist to Address Time Challenges

As health care organizations face a number of emerging challenges, the compensation committee of the not-for-profit hospital and health system board is well served to review and update the executive compensation program periodically.

Health care boards face increasing time pressures. Demands on boards' time include expanding organizational scope, facing uncertain marketplace forces, addressing heightened demands for accountability and transparency, and implementing governance best practices.

Boards must use scarce meeting time together wisely, focusing on organizational future while providing perspective and making decisions to generate value for stakeholders over the long term. A good rule of thumb is boards should spend a majority of time on forward-focused matters.

Trustee morale declines when boards spend too much time on lower value activities, such as receiving information and reviewing administrative matters with questionable need for governance input. Maximizing time spent creating value requires a combination of management, prioritization and preventive efforts.

Individual board members and board chairs can take the following steps to learn more about the problem and galvanize support for action.

Adapted from "How to Make the Most of Your Board's Time," by Steve Gordon, M.D. (Trustee Insights, Nov. 2019).

- Review two years of board agendas and minutes to estimate what percent of board time is spent overseeing performance versus looking forward in a strategic or generative fashion. What barriers exist for a better balance? What countermeasures might be tried? Set a goal for a better balance and then develop and test different approaches. Pick one agenda item that seems of low value or that consumed too much time. Interview the participants to better understand why and whether alternatives were considered.*
- Question a few board colleagues about their perceptions of time management and efficiency. Do they feel overburdened or frustrated? Why? Use these perceptions as the basis for root cause analysis. Ask "Why?" five times to get to the heart of the matter and inform tests of change.
- Test drive some of your thoughts and ideas with executive team members who support the board. What do they see? What processes might be improved?*
- Learn more about your organization's system of improvement. How might it be applied to board work?
- Pick one governance process to improve and recruit an improvement specialist from your organization to guide you. What problem do you see? What barriers exist? What would "better" look like? Ask "Why?" five times to get at the root cause before jumping to solve it.*
- Have a conversation with your board about recruiting an outside, independent process improvement expert for your board in either an advisory capacity or as a full board member (if your bylaws permit).*
- Identify three to five trustees from other organizations and form your own learning collaborative. Pick one core governance process to work on together. Agree to speak by phone every two to three months. Share experience and try different things.
- See who has missed more than one board meeting in the past year and ask them about it. Does the absenteeism relate in any way to board effectiveness?
- Implement a consent agenda process. Be sure everyone knows how to use it properly and why.*
- Document the "how to" of recurring governance processes so that future boards can conduct the same work in a similar fashion without consuming time "reinventing the wheel."*

*These items may be more suited for board chairs or done in close collaboration with the chair and board staff support.