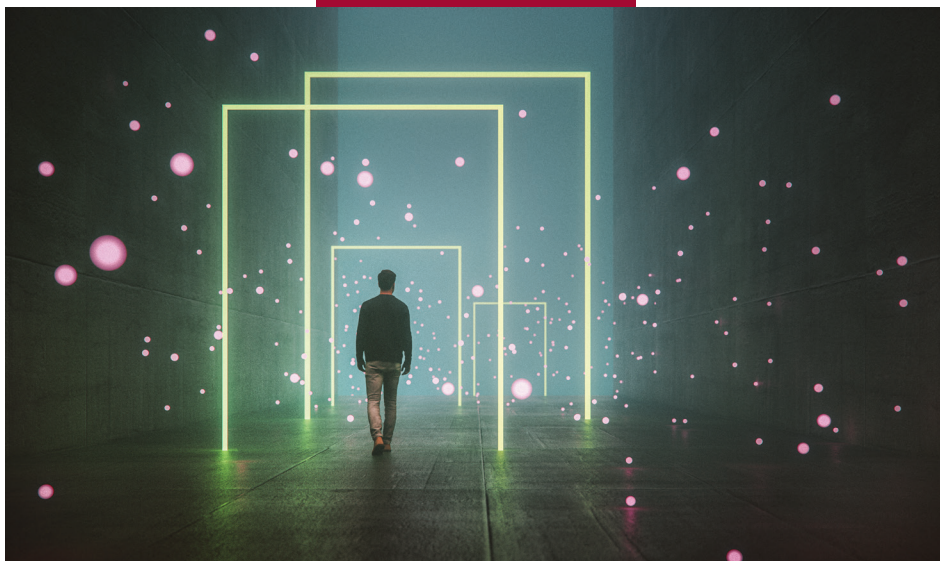


Trustee Insights

GOVERNANCE



What Makes a Future-Forward Board Member?

How strategic insight, humility and diverse perspectives define the next generation of board leadership

BY KIMBERLY McNALLY

Today's health care environment demands more than strong governance fundamentals. Boards are now called on to evolve from oversight bodies into forward-looking strategic partners capable of navigating uncertainty, complexity and rapid change. An effective board plays a critical role in advancing a hospital or health

system's mission and vision. While boards are responsible for oversight — building governance and industry knowledge, fulfilling fiduciary duties, contributing through meetings and committees and attending organizational events — these foundational responsibilities alone are no longer sufficient. To meet today's evolving opportunities and challenges, boards and board members will need to adapt and evolve.

Future-forward boards collaborate with executive leadership to navigate uncertainty, shifting priorities, expectations, pressures and increasing complexity. Working as a cohesive governing team, they provide strategic insight and foresight, question assumptions,

address ethical issues and help shape and test organizational strategy. It's important to note that boards don't co-manage strategy, but rather they play a critical role in governing, testing and overseeing it.

Based on my experience as a trustee, executive coach and governance consultant, three essential traits enable board members to make their strongest contribution to supporting future-forward initiatives: **strategic insight, intellectual humility and a commitment to including a multitude of voices and experiences.**

1. Strategic insight

In practice: Boards can build this capability by dedicating agenda time to forward-looking topics, incorporating external trend briefings and regularly stress-testing strategies against emerging risks.

Future-forward board members "see around corners" to identify trends or potential risks before they become crises. They shift from looking backwards at data to looking ahead at trends and future-focused strategies. Broad business, professional and community experience shapes how they see the world, ask questions, guide strategy and help executive leadership anticipate future needs while staying aligned with mission, vision and values. Strategic insight emerges from deep understanding in areas relevant to board challenges — whether that's

improving population health, workforce shortages, elevating patient experience, deploying AI and digital transformation, managing enterprise risk, fostering innovation or other industry-specific trends.

Impact matters more than “airtime.” Speaking the most or having the loudest voice in a meeting does not equal influence or impact. A board member’s unique contribution is asking high-impact questions at the right time to reveal strategic priorities, uncover gaps, ignite change and shape future direction. Questions should be open-ended, focus on long-term considerations and relate to the organization’s mission and strategic plan. Thoughtful questions — more than opinions — drive productive dialogue, strengthen strategy and shape culture. Asking “what if” questions can catalyze new possibilities and unlock innovation. As one board chair told me, “The most effective members are well prepared, challenge assumptions constructively and respectfully, and generate new insights. They intentionally strike a balance between challenge and support.” Ask these two powerful questions to increase strategic insight:

1. If we choose this direction/ investment/partnership, would the organization’s future capabilities expand or contract?
2. What are we not seeing or do we need more clarity about before we move forward and take action?

2. Intellectual humility

In practice: Board chairs can model this by inviting dissenting views and ensuring all voices are heard before

decisions are made.

Intellectual humility is a mindset that recognizes the limits of one’s knowledge and embraces curiosity about other perspectives. A board member with intellectual humility believes their view is partial and incomplete, even if they have significant expertise and tenure on the board. Deep listening combined with intellectual humility allows a board member to hold their perspective lightly and appreciate the full complexity of governing tomorrow’s health care business challenges. Board members who practice humility listen without interrupting, challenge respectfully, remain open to new evidence and keep their ego in check. This approach strengthens dialogue, reduces defensiveness and guards against strategic failure.

Humility promotes psychological safety by shifting conversations from “I will win” to “We must understand.” Most boardroom conflict escalates not from disagreement but feeling unheard or disrespected. Intellectual arrogance, the opposite of humility, can show up in defensiveness, which leads to tension and conflict. When board members drop their defensive posture, they can hear what’s being said. They speak in a way that communicates they care more about learning and preserving relationships than about being “right” or demonstrating intellectual superiority.

Intellectual humility allows us to embrace new information and be open to changing our mind. Leading with curiosity and humility fosters better decisions, stronger relationships and more effective governance. Practice intellectual humility by asking these two reflective

questions:

1. What might I be missing?
2. What information would change my mind?

A board chair reflected about a board member, “He can offer a cogent perspective on a polarizing issue. And then say, ‘I might be wrong, what am I missing?’ or ‘That’s a great point I hadn’t considered.’ He really models constructive dialogue and will ask our clinicians, ‘I’m curious why you see it that way,’ which fosters collaboration and thorough evaluation of the facts and possibilities.” Board members who practice intellectual humility build strong, trusting relationships with executive leadership and fellow board colleagues. They can both support their peers and hold them accountable for commitments.

3. Commitment to including a multitude of voices and experiences

In practice: Governance committees should align board composition with future strategic needs, not just current gaps.

Highly effective boards include members with a variety of backgrounds and life experiences. Multiple perspectives strengthen governance by improving how boards assess risk, opportunity and strategy while ensuring decisions reflect community needs. Boards that attract younger members, individuals representative of their communities and professionals from new and emerging industries benefit from fresh ideas, stronger connections and enhanced employee and patient experiences.

Two questions to ponder:

1. What voices are we missing?
2. Ten years from now, what would the board think of our current board composition?

Summary

Together, these three traits — **strategic insight, intellectual humility and a commitment to including a multitude of voices and experiences** — enable board members to provide meaningful oversight, strategic insight and positive working relationships. The traits are developed through intention, learning and practice — and when individual members grow, the entire board benefits.

In 2026 and beyond, boards should commit to building these capabilities by assessing current members against these traits, addressing gaps through feedback,

education and coaching, and using them to guide recruitment and selection. As you define and elevate your governance journey ahead, ask two more questions:

What supports our board members to demonstrate strategic insight, intellectual humility and a commitment to hearing multiple perspectives?

What inhibits us from doing so?

The answers to these questions will inform your governance development. By proactively addressing these often-underestimated traits, boards can transform governance into a powerful driver of resilience, growth and innovation.

Call to action:

Boards that intentionally cultivate these traits will be better positioned

to navigate disruption, strengthen organizational resilience and deliver on their mission. The question is not whether these capabilities matter, but whether your board is actively building them.

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Please note that the views of the authors do not always reflect the views of their organizations or of the AHA.