



# Evaluating the Board Chair

*Creating a process for assessing leaders reinforces a commitment to governance accountability and continuous improvement.*

A board committed to continuous improvement realizes that the value of assessing its performance goes beyond meeting Joint Commission or other external requirements. It knows that regular self-evaluation gives it the information needed to understand and build on its strengths and identify and minimize its weaknesses. Performance evaluation also allows the board to demonstrate its commitment to improving performance, even as it holds the CEO and the rest of the organization accountable for doing the same.

That is why during the past 20 years, board evaluation has expanded to include more than periodic full-board performance assessment. Many boards now also evaluate individual member performance at least once during each member's term and take the time to assess the quality of board and committee meetings.

These evaluation practices are moving into the governance mainstream, but evaluating the performance of board leaders, especially the board chair, has received less attention.

A lack of focus on board-chair evaluation is not really surprising. Today, many boards still feel uncomfortable about assessing

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the performance of individual members. After all, most hospital trustees serve voluntarily without compensation. Somehow, pointing out weaknesses and requiring action plans to address them seems at best ungracious and at worst asking way too much of a good-hearted volunteer—especially someone who goes the extra mile and agrees to “lead the leaders.”

Unfortunately, today the stakes are too high for boards to lose the will to evaluate performance at the top. No single board member has the opportunity to have greater influence on the board's success than the chair. Through establishing meeting agendas, presiding over meetings, guiding the board's decision-making processes, influencing the selection of board officers and committee chairs, and working most closely with the CEO, the board chair has enormous effect on determining the

board's work and how well the board accomplishes it.

An effective board uses several mechanisms to ensure that the board chair remains accountable to the board. The board can avoid having a chair who exercises inappropriate authority and set its chair up for success by providing constructive feedback about what he or she is doing well and how to lead more effectively. One way the board can achieve these goals is to put in place a systematic, objective process for evaluating the chair that seeks input from all board members.

## **Board Chair Performance Evaluation Process**

To build upon a history of conducting meaningful performance evaluation and to reinforce a commitment to governance accountability and continuous improvement, boards can take the following steps to facilitate an effective board-chair evaluation.

- 1. Establish a written job description for the position of board chair.** This document clearly defines what is expected of the board chair and establishes clear parameters for what the board chair must and must not do. The

very act of developing this job description will help take what has been implicit in the chairperson role and make it explicit and subject to discussion among board members. This results in clarifying expectations and defining the role and relative authority of the chairperson position, which is the first step in performance evaluation.

**2. Develop criteria to assess the performance of the board chair.**

These criteria should largely be contained in, and distilled from, the written job description. They should be agreed upon by the board and board chair well in advance (at least one year) of conducting the performance evaluation.

**3. Develop and apply a clearly defined process for conducting the board-chair performance evaluation.** The process should be linked to the board chair's term(s) of office and used by the board in determining whether to renew the term of the chair. Steps in this process should include:

- **Agreeing on a formal, written job description for the position of board chair.**

- **Agreeing on a written set of performance evaluation criteria drawn from the job description.**

- **Establishing the time frame for the performance evaluation.**

For example, if a board chair has a term of two years, with a maximum of two consecutive terms, performance evaluation might be conducted six months prior to the expiration of the first term so that the results can be used by the board to determine whether the chair should be elected to a second term, and if not, allow enough time for the board to select another chair.

- **Gathering the data.** First, each board member is asked to complete an evaluation of the board chair using a standard form containing the criteria from the job description. These assessments are completed anonymously. Next, a committee of the board aggregates and analyzes the results of the evaluations.

- **Sharing the results.** The results are then presented to the full board

for discussion in a session where the board chair is excused. The full board agrees on the outcomes of the evaluation and on the feedback that will be given to the board chair. Several board members are then charged with meeting the board chair to communicate the board's feedback, including the decision about whether an additional term is appropriate or not, along with other recommendations for improvement.

- **Making modifications.** The results of the evaluation are then used to modify and refine the board-chair job description and subsequent evaluation processes.

Ensuring a commitment to candid, constructive performance evaluation is central to a leadership culture that values continuous improvement, because the quality of governance that was sufficient to get us to where we are today will be insufficient to get us to where we need to be tomorrow. This same thinking applies even more strongly to evaluation of the board chair, because no one has more influence than the chair on the board's overall effectiveness. ▲

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