

How to Be a Better Trustee

Use these five strategies to better serve your hospital and the surrounding community

By Connie Curran

Much has been written about the resources that hospitals should provide their board members to develop their governance expertise. Generally, a good orientation to the board's work, educational sessions at board meetings, an annual retreat, periodic attendance at outside educational programs and frequent performance evaluation are some of the basics for any board.

It's important, however, for trustees to realize that development is a two-way street. To be effective contributors to the board's work, individual trustees must take responsibility for self-development as well. Here are five ways trustees can take personal responsibility for being good board members.

1 Ask yourself: Why this board? Before you join a board, determine whether you are a good fit for it. Do you have a personal mission that is closely aligned with the organization's mission? It is your personal mission that will drive you to participate in orientation and ongoing education and develop the courage you need to be a good board member. As a trustee, you will be expected to give time, talent and possibly money, and take part in ad-

vocacy for the organization. If you are personally passionate about the mission, this will not feel like an obligation, but rather an opportunity to actualize your mission.

Also ask yourself: What skills and knowledge do I bring to the board? Remember that the board is a team charged with the oversight of the or-

ganization. Find out who else is on the board and the experience and skills they bring to the table. Knowing the other members of the team can help to determine whether you will complement and expand the perspectives and skills available to the board.

2 Know the broader industry and the organization. Although you will be serving on the board of a specific hospital or system, it is also essential to understand the issues confronting the entire health care sector. As a member of the

board, you will be expected to apply what you know about broader health care issues and trends to board deliberations and decision-making at the local level. You will be called upon to engage in thoughtful conversations with other board members, executives and clinical leaders, as well as other stakeholders and community members who count on you to govern effectively on their behalf. That's why board members also need to understand how well their organization is performing. The public is very concerned about health care cost and quality issues. As a trustee, you will be expected to know about the organization's financial trends and metrics. You also should be able to describe initiatives and outcomes relating to quality, safety and patient satisfaction performance.

3 Commit to continuous learning. Because health care is a dynamic sector, board members must continue to broaden their knowledge of health care issues as well as governance trends

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and practices. For example, Securities and Exchange Commission rules on independent directors and their application to oversight of executive compensation, and how rating agencies and investors perceive the value of board oversight of executive succession planning are moving into the nonprofit arena. Issues like these mandate that trustees be active learners. While it is important to ensure that the organization makes time and resources available for board education, trustees also should invest their own resources into furthering their education.

Although they traditionally have received education in the board room or at conferences, seeking out and sharing articles on governance and health care issues with board peers or participating in online learning are low-cost, convenient ways to expand knowledge. Both approaches can be combined with board room discussion to expand the learning experience.

4 Speak up and be intentional. Don't wait for the organization to approach you about the specifics of your board service. Express your interests and communicate your skills. Boards can help by polling their members annually

to determine which committees or initiatives they would like to join.

The governance and nominating committee also should understand members' competencies and current board roles to plan for membership and leadership succession. Rather than waiting to be tapped each year for recommendations, trustees should regularly contribute their suggestions for potential new members or individuals who might be willing to serve on committees.

5 Give and receive feedback. Governance best practices include ongoing evaluation. Make sure that your board has performance evaluation mecha-

nisms in place and is willing to give and receive feedback on individual, committee, board leader and full-board performance. Many boards also use a simple, five-to-10-question survey to evaluate committee and board meetings. This feedback will help individual members, board and committee chairs, and the entire board to continuously improve their governance processes and performance. **T**

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