

Moving Toward a HIGH PERFORMING Health Center Board

By Betsy Vieth and Roger L. Chafournier

The health care industry is undergoing a profound period of turbulence and transformation presenting unique challenges for governance and leadership. In 2010, NACHC convened a two-day meeting of health center Board members and staff leadership to talk about governance and Board and Board member attributes or characteristics they considered most essential to achieve high performance. The resultant benchmarks identified by the group are presented here as a guide for health center Boards to consider when assessing the performance of their own Board and individual Board members.

A Framework for an Effective, High Performing Health Center Board

The board/staff panel first looked at core competencies needed for board effectiveness. The panel emphasized that each Board member need not possess all of these competencies. However, specific core competencies should be present on each and every Board.

TACIT KNOWLEDGE: Board members who hold specific subject matter expertise such as familiarity with law, finance, quality improvement, risk management, insurance, and team-building skills.

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE: Board members who can facilitate interpersonal dynamics and consensus – exhibiting the ability to listen, articulate ideas and debate positions.

PASSION FOR THE MISSION: Board members who understand the purpose of the health center, appreciate the center's core values, and most importantly, can communicate the mission to the broader community.

ADVOCACY: Board members who are effective advocates for health center patients because of their experience and knowledge of the community and its people and/or ties with community organizations.

OUTREACH: Board members who because of their residency within a community or because of their jobs and/or professional experience are able to reach out to others for opportunities to develop, strengthen, and support health center programs.

MARKETING: Board members who can effectively present the health center's vision to the community and who have the skills to work with the media and effectively market their health center.

FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT: Board members who have the knowledge and skills to understand the complex, financial management environment of health centers as well as bottom-line returns on investment and the need for accountability to public and private investors.

FUNDRAISING: Board members who have development skills or whose connections and relationships with other organizations or people within the community can effectively leverage resources and support for the health center.

STRATEGIC PLANNING: Board members who align community health needs with projected short- and long-term plans for the future in terms of growth and development.

Suggested Core Competencies of Individual Board Members

Having discussed attributes of a high performing Board, the board/staff panel moved on to define core competencies of a high performing Board member. The following competencies were suggested:

- Has clarity on the mission and values of the organization.
- Participates actively and attends calls/meetings consistently.
- Is active on committees and subcommittees, which are used as training grounds for board leadership.
- Comes to board and committee meetings prepared, having done the necessary homework.
- Is in tune with the needs of the community.
- Has the ability to evaluate relevance and the application of emerging issues to the work of the Board.
- Articulates the voice of the customer (patients, staff, the community) and serves as an advocate for these stakeholder groups.
- Maintains confidentiality.
- Understands how to channel and direct complaints.
- Keeps up with the times.
- Is able to manage the conflict between individual values/interests and those of the health center.

Using Measures to Achieve Improved Performance

The attributes as described here are meant to provide a picture of strong governance as envisioned by a group of experienced health center board members and staff. Not every competency will apply to every organization, but they can serve as a platform from which Board members can begin discussions that serve their organization's needs and efforts to improve performance. Boards should establish measures of performance as a group and regularly assess their maturity as a governance team and progress in realizing the concepts set forth in this framework.

Summary

The framework set forth in this article, coupled with the skills outlined for individual board members, provide a foundation for reflection. Governing bodies should periodically review and discuss these competencies and the opportunities for improvement as a governance team. In addition, the suggested individual competencies can serve as a helpful reminder to Board members and a basis for evaluation of governance performance.

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