

Assessing Board Performance

Background

All effective organizations have a bias for determining their effectiveness. Boards assess because they are committed to accountability. Governing boards insist that employee performance be assessed to assure that resources are being used effectively and services are being delivered at the expected level of quality. Yet, far too many boards refuse to hold themselves accountable, at their level of contribution to the effectiveness of the organization they head.

Boards direct the affairs of the organizations they head through their policy function, as well as, their overall vision for the organization. Self-assessment provides valuable information and insight for the board's own internal use as it seeks to refine its performance. The board's contribution to the overall organization cannot be assumed; it must be assessed against the board's own pre-determined values, and modified as appropriate.

Only when the board consciously draws conclusions about its own performance can it take steps to improve. A regular assessment will assure the board is operating at maximum efficiency and effectiveness, and that it is adding value to the organization it governs. It is hypocritical for the board to insist upon regular assessment of employees and programs without also insisting upon a rigorous assessment of its own performance.

Why Assess (Rational-Need-Importance)?

1. Assures that board performance meets its predetermined goals, district mission and philosophy.
2. Maintains board's vision on increased future effectiveness.
3. Assures that policies are in place to accomplish goals.
4. Sets the example for all employees that assessment is an expected function in all operations.
5. Permits the board to evaluate its own internal membership needs to assure that appropriate human resources are present or can be recruited to achieve goals.
6. Assures that board reviews its own "time on task" allocations to conform to predetermined goals.
7. Assures that all members review their personal performance and conduct and their contribution to desired outcomes.
8. Assures that board will review the conduct of its meetings to assure consistency with sound group practices.
9. Encourages the building of trust, respect, communication and enables members to work more effectively as par of the team to which they belong.
10. Enables board leadership to evaluate whether its performance was adequate to achieve predetermined goals.

11. Assists the board in establishing future goals for its own performance as well as that of the district's programs.
12. Recognizing that all people will assess constantly, a well-organized assessment will 'institutionalize' an informal process to better assure achievement of desired outcomes.
13. When done and documented at regular and frequent intervals, provides understanding of long-term progress toward achievement of goals.
15. Since any sound assessment can be performed only when existing standards are known, assures that board reviews its purposes, mission, vision, philosophy and goals as well as those of the district.
16. Gives members security in dealing with the community that the board is performing at high standards.
17. Assures that membership and leadership recognize which internal functions of the board operation either assist or hinder it in the achievement of predetermined goals.

Expected Outcomes

Board should expect the following outcomes from a self-assessment process:

1. Members will understand they are assessing performance and not personalities or individuals.
2. Members' views of their individual goals for the district will be better understood by them and by other members.
3. Members will better understand how the manager's performance and that of the district staff may assist the board in achieving greater efficiency in its own operation.
4. Members will understand if their own performance was consistent with their personal expectations.
5. Members will understand how they can help board leadership improve its performance.
6. Members will have a better understanding of organizational mission and philosophy.
7. Members will have an understanding of how to make meetings more efficient, soundly accomplishing more in shortened time periods.
8. Members will understand at least one technique for self assessment, for assessment of the board, and for assessment of board leadership.
9. Members will understand at least one technique for identifying and recruiting needed and appropriate candidates for future board membership.
10. Members will understand the importance of formal goal setting as a requirement for self and board assessment.
11. Members will understand individual ethical and effective behavior within working groups to assure mission achievement.
12. Members will better understand the limitations of their roles and how they integrate with the domains of employees and others in the community.
13. Members will better understand the role and weight of external pressures on board actions and

efficiency.

Objectives of Self-Assessment

The following are some of the objectives a board should try to accomplish through a self-assessment process:

1. To assure the board is accountable for its own performance.
2. To allow each member of the board to assess his/her individual performance as a member of a team.
3. To improve communication among board members and between the board and the manager.
4. To assure a thorough understanding of the district's goals and commitments.
5. To assure that individual concerns about the board's performance are known and understood by each board member.
6. To assure that decision-making processes are effective and meet the expectations of board members.
7. To assure that new members joining the board understand the operational procedures and group expectations.
8. To assess the individual strengths and weaknesses of board members.
9. To assure continued improvement and capable leadership by the board.

Establishing an Assessment Process

Before performance is assessed, it is important that the board and manager agree on a process as well as appropriate instruments to be used. Boards should be willing to adopt a process that holds promise for effectively measuring performance, with the understanding that the process and instrument may change with the board as it grows. The assessment process is evolutionary.

The effectiveness of any assessment process depends more on the board's commitment to look at its own performance than on the inherent adequacy of the process and instrument. When board members' mutual commitment is present, they will find suitable vehicles for open conversation to occur. Seek to make the assessment process as acceptable as possible, realizing there is no perfect solution. The central commitment must be to review performance, not fail to do so because the process may be somewhat flawed. In the absence of a full commitment to assess performance, no plan, will be effective.

Preparing for Board Self Assessment

Before any assessment of board performance can be achieved, the board must determine the standards against which it will measure its own performance. If the board concludes that its

performance in board-manager relations, the conduct of board meetings, and internal communication are important values, the instrument and process should measure performance in those areas.

Next procedures must be developed to allow the board members to express their individual views about the degree to which the board has performed effectively. These individual judgments will contribute to an overall board determination about performance. In this way, the board should learn about itself and should be able to determine the areas in which it has performed well and the areas where improvement might be needed.

Start the process by listing the performance areas you feel should be assessed by your board and indicate the standards to which the board should be held accountable. A variety of assessment instruments are included from which your board can select the one most closely matching your needs.

As you review the assessment instruments consider the following:

Format

- Is the format easily understood or difficult to follow?
- Are the answers readily apparent and can they be scored relatively easily?
- Will these questions have common meaning to each board member?

Scoring Process

- Is the scoring process number driven or is it word driven?
- Is each board member expected to contribute an individual response which then will lead to board conversations and board response?

Adequacy of Instrument

- Is the instrument too simple or too difficult for the board to use?
- Can members of the board be expected to commit the time necessary to use this document.
- How close does this instrument come to evaluating the areas we believe to be important?
- Are there gaps between what this instrument evaluates and what we commit ourselves to do?
- Are there questions in this instrument that should be deleted?

You may find that you need to adapt them to suit your board's needs. Keep in mind the process and commitment to assess are more important than the instrument itself. With a strong commitment and good intentions, the board will find a way to address its concerns, even with a flawed instrument.

Summary of the Characteristics of Board Self-Assessment

1. The process of assessing, and the instruments used to accomplish that purpose, should be aimed at improving performance. Assessment is not intended to be punitive but rather to reward good

performance and point out areas that need improvement.

2. Members of the board themselves should determine that standards against which the board will assess its performance. To assess someone else's values rather than the board's own values, will accomplish little.
3. The board must recognize the difference between goals that it sets for the district versus the goals that it adopts for its own internal performance. While there may well be significant overlap between the two, in this instance the board is not assessing the district's achievement of its goals, but rather the board's performance and the value it adds to assist in the overall district effectiveness.
4. Once the assessment has been conducted, the job is not finished until a performance improvement plan has been established. Appropriate instruments are included in these materials to assist the board in formulating improvement plans.
5. Regardless of how thorough an assessment instrument seems to be, it is to be expected that the board, in its follow-up discussion, will identify other areas of its performance that are worthy of review. The purpose of the assessment instrument and process is to stimulate discussion. That discussion can be rather free-wheeling, which is perfectly acceptable.
6. The board should commit to assess its own performance at least annually, and should determine in advance the date and time for that event to occur. Of course, continuing assessment of various parts of the board's performance might be done but it is supremely important for a thorough assessment to be conducted at least annually.
7. An overall assessment of board strengths and opportunities for development should be the result of individual board member assessments. It is not uncommon for the views of individual members to vary considerably from the views of other members. However, in follow-up conversation, it should be expected that some board consensus can be reached about the board's overall performance.
8. Once conclusions have been drawn, and after performance plans have been established, the board should provide for itself appropriate training and assistance to assure its performance meets predetermined expectations.

Post-Assessment Improvement Plan

After the board has completed its self-assessment and the results have been determined, conclusions should have been made about areas for improvement. Keep in mind these performance-enhancing actions are not to be directed at the district, but rather at the board itself. Your objective is to determine procedures for the board to follow to improve its own performance.

These might be some examples of areas for board improvement:

- To improve relationships with the manager
- To make meetings more effective, and more efficient

- To improve internal relations among members of the board in order to present a more harmonious picture to the constituents.

These are the things you want to do. This is what you want to accomplish. Now it is important to determine how these things will be achieved. For example, what specific actions should be taken by the board to improve internal relationships? It is important for the board to think sequentially, one step at a time, in order to assure that the goal can be achieved in an efficient manner. In addition to deciding what is to be achieved and by what means, the board then should determine who will be responsible for taking each of those actions, and a date by which those actions should be taken. Finally, the board should decide some measure of success in order to allow members to know when these actions have been achieved and the goals met.