

Trustee Insights

LEVERAGING TECHNOLOGY



The Socially Distant Board Room: Maximizing Virtual Governance

Embracing the realities of virtual governance structures

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Gone are the days of “that would never work.” Despite strained systems and great disruption, the COVID-19 public health crisis has yielded benefits across many facets of daily work and life. For health care organizations, the crisis revealed a heightened and profound ability to adapt quickly and embrace rapid cycle improvement.

Health care governing bodies are rooted in traditional structure and process, and board cultures are fostered through group dialogue and relationship building. As safety

measures were implemented to manage viral spread, board rooms across the country went dark. At the same time, the need for board involvement greatly increased. Organizations reacted quickly to adopt virtual meeting platforms, adapting practices to maintain effective governance. As it becomes clear the social distancing impact of COVID-19 will be sustained, now is the time to evaluate and enhance the virtual experience.

Board meetings have traditionally been the primary mechanism for sharing information, making decisions and creating connection. The sudden transition to virtual meetings created change and challenge. Board members and senior executives alike are adapting to

new logistics and unfamiliar ways of interacting. And yet, an engaged and effective board has never been more important. Against this backdrop, it is imperative to maximize board meetings in a virtual environment. With a few months of experience, executive teams and board chairs should collaborate on ways to reenergize the dialogue and interaction.

Meeting Frequency and Timing

Take a fresh look at the frequency and timing of board meetings. Virtual meetings may foster a sense of disconnection, and it may be necessary to increase the frequency of meetings with board members. This could mean shorter, more frequent meetings, or adding educational opportunities between formal meetings. Also evaluate the timing of regularly scheduled meetings. If board meetings are typically scheduled over lunch or dinner, those times may not be optimal when you are not physically sharing a meal. Instead, consider a meeting time that best suits remote work schedules, and always allocate breaks during long meetings. Making small tweaks to the current meeting schedule could yield increased participation and engagement.

Agenda Development

Under the best of circumstances, it is challenging to create a board meeting agenda that allows for infor-

mation sharing, education and strategic dialogue while also addressing fiduciary obligations.

The virtual meeting platform is an opportunity for senior executives and board chairs to reevaluate meeting agendas. If meetings feel rushed, without enough time for strategic dialogue, reduce agenda content by 25%. Critically evaluate potential topics and reserve the agenda for those requiring discussion and action. While it can be challenging at first, allowing ample discussion is critical for strategic alignment and engaged decision-making.

If fewer topics will be addressed during the meeting, it is crucial to ensure the board receives other key updates and information. Provide executive summary briefings on key topics in the meeting materials circulated in advance. Provide enough context and content to be meaningful and also be brief enough to be engaging. Preread materials can replace traditional agenda items such as committee reports, market updates and timely operational changes. These preread materials become critical for education and information sharing and to enable maximum utilization of prime meeting time. Try it. Ask for feedback. Keep adjusting.

Relationship Building

Casual conversations as people are gathering for a meeting or lingering afterward cannot be completely replaced. Sharing stories about family, current events and work builds camaraderie and trust. Get creative in leveraging virtual meeting

platforms for this softer but critically important element of effective governance. Partner with internal or external IT resources to bring innovation to virtual board meetings. Open the meeting early to allow casual dialogue among board members and staff as they join the session. Build time into the agenda for intentional informal connection.



Consider using breakout functionality within the virtual platform for small group chats and provide questions to facilitate these brief conversations. Embrace the opportunity to interact with colleagues and board members in personal settings. Have some fun and don't be afraid to comment on the dog walking across the screen or the snack the board chair is enjoying.

You may find that virtual meetings bring improved attendance as members don't have to add in driving or transition time to attend. Get creative and leverage this shift to enhance governance and engagement.

Connection Outside of Meetings

While board meetings are the cornerstone of governance activity, connection outside of meetings is now increasingly important. Consider adding brief check-in calls between formal meetings. These calls should be optional with a brief agenda and time for questions and interaction. The senior leadership team and board chair also can hold individual calls with board members to solicit feedback and provide updates. By rotating these touchpoints among the team, the time commitment is modest and the opportunity to build stronger board relationships extends across the leadership team. Regular email updates are another opportunity to stay connected with the board. While email does not provide the same level of interaction, key operational and strategic updates can foster a sense of connection to the work within the organization.

Board Member Responsibilities

The fiduciary duty of care requires board members to commit the necessary time, attention and curiosity to advance the organization's mission. Governance supported by a virtual or hybrid platform requires trustees to recommit and potentially expand the behaviors associated with this important responsibility.

Preparing for meetings by reading any advanced materials is more important than ever, to enable efficiency and the opportunity to seek clarifications in advance

or during the meeting. It also is important for members to interact as they would during a traditional meeting. While this interaction may be through a chat box or a virtual hand raise, it is necessary to ensure a two-way dialogue. A virtual meeting platform can make it easy and tempting to multitask. Members should approach the virtual meeting with the same attention and focus as if they were in the board room. Finally, members

should proactively reach out to the senior leadership team with questions or feedback to enhance the governance experience.

In a time when strong leadership is paramount, we must embrace the realities of virtual governance structures, and adapt just as we have done so during this time to serve our patients and protect our staff. If we are intentional and creative, we

can keep board members informed and engaged while maintaining relationships and infusing the “humaness” factor into governance.

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