

Board Culture Profile: Improving the Work of Governing Boards

Detailed Project Description

Effective governing boards are essential to successful organizations. This paper outlines an innovative approach that will create a set of profiles describing the behavior of governing boards. Much of board behavior is shaped by board culture. The profiles that highlight aspects of board culture will provide boards and leaders with a view of governance that is mostly invisible and therefore go unexamined, yet are crucial to effective governance. While the project's initial focus is with college and university boards, both public and private, this approach will be readily transferrable to nonprofit and corporate boards.

Our approach is to put into meaningful, comparative frameworks the elements of governing board culture that:

1. Reveal predominant board behaviors and how they impact board work both positively and negatively;
2. Engage trustees in critical thinking about the relationship between better governance and higher organizational performance; and
3. Provide a roadmap for boards to become aware of blindspots, take advantage of their strengths, and mitigate their weaknesses.

There is an integral relationship between board culture, effective governance, trustee behavior, and group dynamics across a diversity of sectors, including higher education, health care, nonprofit and corporate (Davis, 2014; Prybil, 2006; Charan, 2005; Nadler, Behan, and Nadler, 2006). The ways in which trustees interact, construct their agendas, and work together matters. In fact, understanding board culture is essential because as complex social systems how trustees work together determines their effectiveness (Sonnenfeld, 2002). "Most directors aren't aware of the group dynamics that affect the board's behavior...how much their membership in groups influences their behavior and how others behave toward them" and are, therefore, "blind to the need to correct it in some cases or to exploit it in others" (Alderfer, 1986, p. 38). Attempts to improve governance through policy mandates and structural reorganizations address only part of the problem and may never get at the core of ingrained patterns of behavior that really matter to board effectiveness.

Project Scope

The product of the work will be a diagnostic tool, the "Board Culture Profile," which aims to inform a process of self-reflection leading to a deeper understanding of the strengths and pitfalls of one's own board behaviors and culture. Current board assessment tools and approaches mostly focus on board mechanics and architecture (e.g., number of board meetings, board size, committee structure), and roles and responsibilities of boards and their individual members. They either undervalue or overlook entirely board behavior and social dynamics.

Research has yet to produce any taxonomy—let alone one that is field-tested—that could diagnose and categorize governance preferences, board personalities, and collective trustee behaviors. A goal of the work is to identify a defined set of commonly occurring prototypes of board behavior and culture. The ultimate result is to increase the value boards can create for the institutions they govern through understanding their cultural strengths and

weaknesses. Such taxonomies are prevalent for individuals (Myers-Briggs Type Inventory; DiSC), leaders (Bolman and Deal's Four Frames; FSI), and organizations (Morgan's Images of Organizations) where they are used for personal development, executive coaching, personnel recruitment and improved overall performance. Boards and the institutions they govern would be well served to have similar tools.

The Board Culture Profile is not a ranking or rating device, nor is it intended to create a hierarchy of board cultures. Instead, we are creating a series of comparative descriptors that illuminate board personality preferences. The framework and patterns of board culture are intended to be meaningful to a wide range of boards. The elements of the Board Culture Profile are grounded in research on organizational culture and dynamics, and team function/dysfunction, as well as field based research on college and university boards. They include:

1. *How boards act*, with a focus on the distribution of influence, what boards strive to maximize, and trustee comportment;
2. *How boards think and decide*, with a disposition toward either breadth or focus;
3. *What mindset boards have*, through a business or nonprofit lens; and,
4. *How boards perceive their roles*, as partner or critic, as inside or outside the institution.

We envision an approach that combines board culture survey and observation to fully develop the board culture profile; and the board culture framework will be empirically validated as described below. Although other tools to assess board performance exist, none focus as intentionally or as comprehensively on board culture.

Principals

This project is a joint effort by the following scholar-practitioners:

- Peter Eckel, Senior Fellow and Director of Leadership Programs, Penn AHEAD
- Matt Hartley, Professor of Education at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education and Executive Director of AHEAD
- Cathy Trower, President of Trower & Trower, Inc. (a governance consulting firm)

Advisor

- Richard Chait, professor emeritus, Harvard University

The principals and project advisor have extensive experience with nonprofit and higher education governance.

Peter Eckel previously served for three years as the Vice President for Programs and Research at the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) where he oversaw the capacity building programming and consulting work of the association. At AGB, he led the national study of presidents on their boards and developed the AGB Presidential Initiative on effective governance, among other efforts. He currently is a trustee at the University of La Verne (CA).

Matt Hartley, a leading scholar with deep international governance experience leads a multi-year project in Kazakhstan on governance reform and was a principal in a World Bank Project on governance benchmarking efforts in the Middle East and North Africa.

Cathy Trower was formerly a research director at Harvard University for sixteen years, a senior level administrator at Johns Hopkins University for four years, and has been a

governance consultant to well over one hundred boards over the past two decades. She is the author of *The Practitioner's Guide to Governance as Leadership* (2013), and currently serves on the boards of BoardSource, Wheaton College (MA), and RiverWoods CCRC of Exeter, NH.

Richard Chait is one of the world's foremost scholars on governance. He has co-authored three highly respected books on nonprofit governance, including *Governance as Leadership* (2006). He has consulted with hundreds of nonprofit and university boards over the past three decades. He has served as a trustee on several nonprofit boards.

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