

Board Culture Profile: Improving the Work of Governing Boards

Effective governing boards are essential to successful organizations. They are complex and many seem to perennially under perform. The key to better governance may well be board culture, which along with history, board size and institutional context, determines board behavior. Board culture is the most challenging of this set. It is often invisible to those immersed in it and it is difficult to describe clearly and consistently.

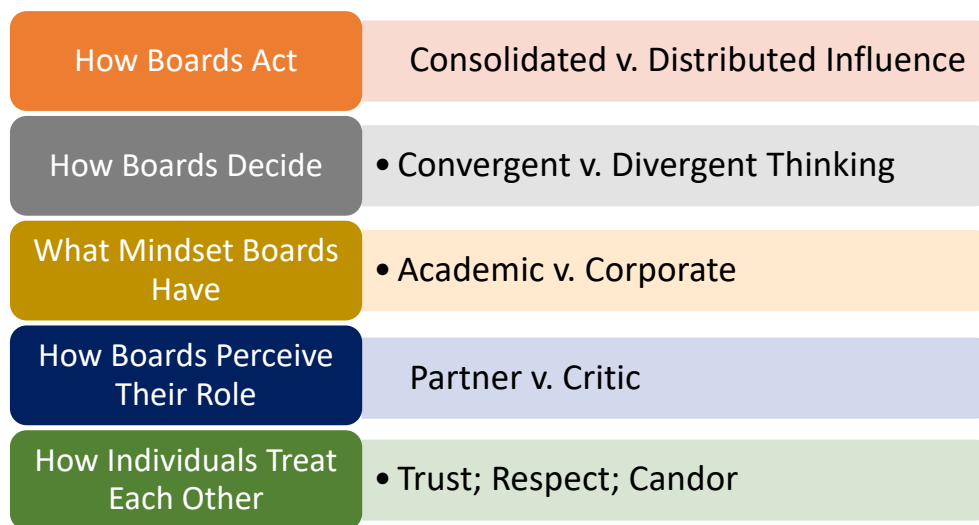
Our approach aims to make board culture concrete and therefore actionable. Attempts to improve governance through policy mandates and structural reorganizations address only part of the problem and may never get at the core of ingrained patterns of behavior that really matter to board effectiveness. The right board culture is essential to moving the board, and thus the institution, forward.

Our process will

- 1) Reveal predominant board cultural preferences and how they impact board work, both in terms of strengths and potential vulnerabilities;
- 2) Engage trustees in crucial conversations about the relationship between board culture and better governance; and
- 3) Provide a customized pathway for boards to take advantage of their strengths and mitigate their weaknesses.

Board Culture Framework

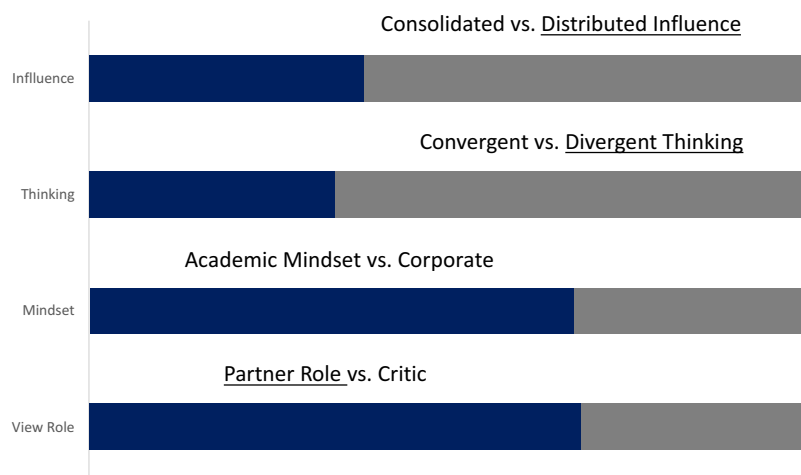
Culture is a complex pattern of beliefs, traditions, assumptions, and practices that become embedded in group behavior and institutionalized in organizations. Drawing on research from organizational culture and dynamics, team function, and governing boards, we identified five key dimensions of board culture, of which the first four are continuums that describe cultural preferences. While not total in its scope, this framework provides a starting point to articulate and frame board culture.



Via a survey (and optional observation), we can create a board culture profile and capture meaningful differences within the board, such as by new and long-serving trustees. Below is a sample profile of a private university:

University of the Diocesan

Board Profile



For each of the factors, the profile allows us to develop a list of strengths and challenges, potential vulnerabilities, and a set of scenarios for which the board is and is not well-suited. For example:

How Boards Act: Consolidated Influence	
<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Powerbrokers more easily buy in; • Reduced time to decisions; • May be beneficial if trustee knowledge/capacity is uneven; or undesired; • Core group develops more effective and efficient processes; • Fewer arguments and disagreements. 	<p>Potential Vulnerabilities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doesn't provide equally shared opportunities for involvement; • Ideas may not get traction unless proposed by the influential; • The unengaged may become disengaged; • Creates us v. them; • Assumes the power group knows all and others have little to add. What if they're wrong?

For more information, contact project principals:

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