



Future of Association Boards (FAB) Community Dialogue Report

July 2025 | #FABReport

Presented by:

re:members

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Welcome Message from re:Members

At re:Members, we hold a steadfast belief in the power of uniting people in community. Through our work delivering innovative products, services, and technologies to thousands of associations, labor unions, and fraternities and sororities, re:Members has learned the importance of building meaningful connections to solve critical problems.

With this commitment in mind, I am excited to welcome you to the Future of Association Boards (FAB) Community Dialogue Report. Since the summer of 2024, the FAB Community Dialogue has engaged in a dedicated and inclusive conversation about the critical role that boards play in the association community, and how to strengthen their performance today and for the future. Let me express my personal appreciation for the contributions of all FAB Community Dialogue participants, including our curator and partner in this work, Jeff De Cagna of Foresight First LLC.

My challenge to all readers is simple: use the nine recommendations included in this report to elevate board performance in your association and organizations throughout our community. The FAB Report offers a compelling opportunity to unite all stakeholders in the work of building association boards capable of navigating an increasingly challenging world. We hope you will join this purposeful endeavor.



Patrick Dorsey
SVP, Marketing
July 2025

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Introduction

At this critical moment in our history, the stakes for associations, their boards, and the human beings they serve could not be higher.

More than 2,000 days into what has been exceptionally turbulent decade, the systemic upheaval, risks, and problems confronting association community decision-makers show no signs of abating. Indeed, the most plausible future for the rest of the 2020s is that the turbulence will intensify.

Even before this decade comes to a close, the 2030s are emerging rapidly on the horizon, and there is growing worldwide apprehension about what the next decade will hold for humanity. As they continue to navigate unforgiving conditions in the short term, association community decision-makers also must direct both their attention and intention toward what they will leave for successors when the 2030s begin.

Since August 2024, the Future of Association Boards (FAB) Community Dialogue has been exploring what our community, its boards, and other governing contributors must do to meet this critical moment and prepare for whatever comes next. This report contains nine recommendations shaped by many months of FAB Community Dialogue LinkedIn polls and posts, regular Zoom meetings, and a bi-weekly newsletter. I truly appreciate my FAB Community Dialogue colleagues for the outstanding contributions they have made to our work, and my friends at re:Members for their partnership and support.

The FAB Report's nine recommendations will not apply in equal measure to every association, board, or individual stakeholder. There is also no expectation of universal agreement with every recommendation; alternative ideas and perspectives are always welcome. ***When taken together, however, these nine recommendations provide a strong platform from which to initiate the collective action our community needs to elevate board performance without delay.*** The challenge to every reader of this report is to act now to realize that outcome.

Immediately following this introduction is a two-page summary of the FAB Report's nine recommendations: three for the association community, three for boards, presiding officers, and directors, and three for chief staff executives (CSEs), chief officers for specific functions/portfolios (CXOs) and senior teams, and voluntary governing contributors.

Each recommendation has its own two-page presentation within this report that includes the same elements:

- ✓ **The context for making the recommendation:** Each recommendation is situated in a larger context that must be considered to understand the significance of the proposal.
- ✓ **The concern(s) the recommendation addresses:** Each recommendation is motivated by one or more concerns that require immediate attention to elevate board performance.
- ✓ **The challenge(s) the recommendation invites readers to address:** Each recommendation invites (and hopefully inspires) every reader to take decisive action to elevate board performance.
- ✓ **Related orthodox beliefs:** Orthodox beliefs are the deep-seated assumptions we make about how the world works with which our community must reckon to elevate board performance.
- ✓ **Reflection questions:** By integrating inquiry into collective action, readers can expand stakeholder inclusion and create more significant impact.

Every association board currently serving is setting an example for the boards that will follow. The painful and enduring consequences of turbulence in this decade demand this example reflect the highest level of care and concern for the human beings our community's organizations serve. This report will help today's association boards build a human-first foundation for high performance in 2025 and beyond. ***Let's get started.***

Jeff De Cagna AIMP FRSA FASAE, Curator and Editor
Future of Association Boards (FAB) Community Dialogue
July 2025

Summary of Recommendations

Recommendations for the Association Community

Recommendation #1: Renew board purpose with stewardship

The deeper purpose of association boards for the rest of this decade and into the 2030s is stewardship, not leadership. The current leadership paradigm interferes with association boards leaving their organizations better than how they found them for the benefit of both stakeholders and successors.

Recommendation #2: Focus board attention on the work of foresight

The time for board “experimentation” with foresight is at an end. In their stewardship role, association boards must devote their primary attention to the work of foresight and partner with other contributors to ensure foresight is a consistent board and organizational practice rather than an ancillary exercise.

Recommendation #3: Compose boards based on purpose and capabilities

The foundational performance problems of association boards center on composition practices that do not consistently prioritize board stewardship and director/officer capabilities for board service. Electoral methods of composing association boards must give way to the design of more equitable capacity-focused selection approaches.

Recommendations for Boards, Presiding Officers, and Directors

Recommendation #4: Boards act in full partnership with association staff

Association staff partners bring unique experience and expertise without which boards cannot function. While association boards must carry the primary stewardship burden, they also must agree to collaborate with staff partners who share in the work of stewardship.

Recommendation #5: Presiding officers accept primary responsibility for board performance

For every association presiding officer, there is no more important responsibility than ensuring the highest level of board performance. Regardless of title, board presiding officers must set and sustain a shared expectation for effective stewardship among their board colleagues.

Recommendation #6: Board directors accept responsibility for elevating their performance

Every current and future board director must be clear-eyed about the demands and expectations of association board service and the commitment required to prepare.

Performing at the highest possible level as a board director begins long before joining the board, requires ongoing effort, and continues to be a daily responsibility after being seated.

Recommendations for CSEs, CXOs/Senior Teams, and Voluntary Governing Contributors

Recommendation #7: CSEs expect board/CSE interdependence

Association chief staff executives (CSEs) need a higher level of support from their boards.

Consistent with creating genuine board partnership with the full association staff, CSEs and boards must establish mutual reciprocity and trust to enable strong board stewardship and positive CSE action on behalf of the association.

Recommendation #8: CXOs/senior teams are “board-ready”

To make a meaningful impact on the board’s work, association CXOs and senior teams must develop a fully “board-ready” practice. In addition to advising boards on issues within their specific functional or portfolio roles, senior executives should make critical contributions to board stewardship and foresight.

Recommendation #9: Voluntary governing contributors demonstrate support for boards

Voluntary governing contributors involved with work that supports the board, including committees and task forces, also must demonstrate support for the board. Association board service is a difficult burden to carry, and by working together, all governing contributors can help lessen that burden and elevate board performance.

Curator’s Note About the Nine Recommendations

The FAB Report’s nine recommendations will not apply in equal measure to every association, board, or individual stakeholder. There is also no expectation of universal agreement with every recommendation; alternative ideas and perspectives are always welcome. **When taken together, however, these nine recommendations provide a strong platform from which to initiate the collective action our community needs to elevate board performance without delay.** The challenge to every reader of this report is to act now to realize that outcome.

Recommendation #1

Association Community

Renew Board Purpose With Stewardship

The deeper purpose of association boards for the rest of this decade and into the 2030s is stewardship, not leadership. The current leadership paradigm interferes with association boards leaving their organizations better than how they found them for the benefit of both stakeholders and successors.

Context

As the current decade continues, association boards must work to address the mounting impact of systemic upheaval, risks, and problems on their organizations, fields, and stakeholders. Undertaking this critical work requires a clear sense of board purpose that is adaptive to the social, technological, economic, environmental, and political factors and forces currently reshaping the world.

Concerns

Without a strong sense of purpose that clarifies what they must become, association boards may perform in ways that undermine organizational stability. For example, operating within the leadership-centric paradigm encourages many boards to involve themselves in day-to-day association management activities. In addition, the emphasis on “volunteer leadership” may result in boards choosing to work only on those responsibilities with which they feel comfortable.

Challenge to the Association Community

The association community should champion the challenge of renewing board purpose with stewardship in every organization. Stewardship is the higher calling of leaving our community’s associations (and by extension the community itself) better than how boards found them for the benefit of stakeholders and successors. The choice to prioritize stewardship over leadership will help nurture a disciplined practice of collective action that will better prepare associations to move forward for the rest of this decade and into the 2030s.

Related Orthodox Beliefs

Orthodox beliefs are the deep-seated assumptions we make about how the world works. The three orthodox beliefs listed below relate specifically to board stewardship.



Orthodox Belief #1: Stewardship is subordinate to leadership.

Stewardship is a distinct approach to advancing human systems that focuses on leaving them better than how they were found for the benefit of stakeholders and successors.



Orthodox Belief #2: Association boards are leadership groups.

The future advancement of associations depends on boards choosing the disciplined collective action of stewardship over the pursuit of individual leadership priorities.



Orthodox Belief #3: Association boards can always choose what they want to do.

Board agency includes neither rejecting fiduciary and risk-related responsibilities nor engaging in the operational management of the association.

Related Questions

Association board directors/officers should reflect on the following three questions regarding board stewardship and discuss at least one of them at an upcoming meeting.

- Question #1** Why is stewardship a higher calling than leadership for our board?
- Question #2** What does a “disciplined practice of collective action” through stewardship require of us as directors/officers?
- Question #3** How will building board stewardship contribute to making our association more resilient?

Recommendation #2 Association Community

Focus Board Attention on the Work of Foresight

The time for board “experimentation” with foresight is at an end. In their stewardship role, association boards must devote their primary attention to the work of foresight and partner with other contributors to ensure that foresight is a consistent board and organizational practice rather than an ancillary exercise.

Context

With global levels of risk and uncertainty on the rise, boards operating across different sectors are working to create a robust capacity for anticipation. The need to imagine plausible futures and stress test decisions is increasingly seen as an essential capability for all organizations, and associations are no exception. Foresight is an intentional process of learning with the future that is vital to effective association board stewardship.

Concerns

There has been an expanded adoption of foresight practices in the association community over the last ten years. Unfortunately, many association boards continue to resist foresight or regard it as nothing more than an occasional activity. While limited experimentation with foresight may have served associations well at one time, the failure to fully integrate foresight as a consistent board and organizational practice is a significant missed opportunity.

Challenge to the Association Community

The association community should embrace the challenge of focusing board attention on the work of foresight. Instead of building our community’s anticipation capability one organization at a time, boards and CSEs should collaborate with other associations within in their industries and professions to accelerate capacity-building and the full integration of foresight. Widely sharing knowledge and next practices developed through the work of foresight will strengthen board learning, decision-making, and stewardship.

Related Orthodox Beliefs

Orthodox beliefs are the deep-seated assumptions we make about how the world works. The three orthodox beliefs listed below relate specifically to the work of foresight.



Orthodox Belief #1: Foresight is unnecessary since it is impossible to predict the future.

The work of foresight involves imagining and learning with multiple futures that are plausible rather than attempting to predict or forecast specific futures.



Orthodox Belief #2: Foresight is not essential board work.

To leave their organizations better than how they found them for stakeholders and successors, it is essential for association boards to build a consistent practice of foresight.



Orthodox Belief #3: Association boards are not prepared to engage in the work of foresight.

Foresight is a form of intentional learning that association boards can nurture with the support of other contributors both inside and outside their organizations.

Related Questions

Association board directors/officers should reflect on these three questions regarding the work of foresight and discuss at least one at their next full board meeting.

Question #1 Why is foresight critical to our board stewardship?

Question #2 What would developing a consistent practice of foresight mean for our board?

Question #3 How can we collaborate with other association boards to expand the adoption of foresight practices?

Recommendation #3

Association Community

Compose Boards Based on Purpose and Capabilities

The foundational performance problems of association boards center on composition practices that do not consistently prioritize board stewardship and director/officer capabilities for board service. Electoral methods of composing association boards must give way to the design of more equitable capacity-focused selection approaches.

Context

The decisions made in composing the board of directors for any organization directly connect to board performance. It is crucial to seat directors who are prepared to accept the substantial responsibilities and requirements of board service and willing to sustain the necessary performance commitment over time. The voluntary nature of association board service amplifies the importance of identifying and choosing well-qualified directors and officers.

Concerns

Composing boards using electoral methods does not provide associations with the best pathway toward high performance. Elections favor candidates with name recognition and high standing in their fields often without regard to their readiness and suitability for board service. The addition of geographic requirements in board composition further limits the opportunity for associations to identify the candidates who are best prepared for board stewardship.

Challenge to the Association Community

The association community should champion the implementation of more equitable capacity-focused board selection approaches. Associations can make board candidate identification equitable and inclusive while also ensuring selection processes are disciplined and rigorous. Designing board composition for high performance rather than individual popularity is a critical step for associations to take to strengthen board stewardship and ensure the right combination of director/officer attributes and capabilities for board service.

Related Orthodox Beliefs

Orthodox beliefs are the deep-seated assumptions we make about how the world works. The three orthodox beliefs listed below relate specifically to board composition.



Orthodox Belief #1: Association governing must be based on a government/political model.

Associations are not governments and association board directors/officers are not political officeholders who require selection through electoral methods.



Orthodox Belief #2: Association board service is a volunteer role.

Fiduciary responsibility differentiates board service from traditional volunteerism and directors/officers make a voluntary commitment to serve in their roles.



Orthodox Belief #3: Only members can serve on association boards.

Instead of using governing documents to restrict eligibility, associations can expand their qualified board candidate pools by recruiting potential directors from outside the organization.

Related Questions

Association board directors/officers should reflect on these three questions regarding board composition and discuss at least one at their next full board meeting.

- | | |
|--------------------|---|
| Question #1 | Why is it critical to integrate our board purpose with board composition? |
| Question #2 | What is the impact of our association's electoral/geographic methods of board composition on board performance? |
| Question #3 | How can we design more equitable and capacity-focused approaches for selecting board directors? |

Recommendation #4

Boards, Presiding Officers,
and Directors

Boards Act in Full Partnership with Association Staff

Association staff partners bring unique experience and expertise without which boards cannot function. While association boards must carry the primary stewardship burden, they also must agree to collaborate with staff partners who share in the work of stewardship.

Context

Almost without exception, association board directors/officers are employed in compensated roles outside of their board service. As voluntary contributors to their organizations, they choose to carry the burdens of stewardship, but they need not (and should not) carry them alone. The vast majority of association boards have access to the benefits of meaningful expertise and support from staff partners for board work.

Concerns

Board/staff partnership is among the most frequently repeated phrases in association management discourse and yet an idea that remains elusive in far too many organizations in this community. When boards assume that staff do not understand industry or professional issues or lack expertise, the board/staff relationship can become adversarial. When boards reject ideas and insights from staff partners, they are undermining their capacity for effective stewardship.

Challenge to Association Boards

Association boards must agree to full partnership with their organizations' staff members. Going it alone is not an option for boards focused on stewarding their organizations in a world of systemic upheaval, risks, and problems. Association boards must reject orthodox beliefs about the involvement of staff partners in their work and embrace the unique expertise and support they provide. Achieving this solidarity of purpose is essential to advancing the board's stewardship role.

Related Orthodox Beliefs

Orthodox beliefs are the deep-seated assumptions we make about how the world works. The three orthodox beliefs listed below relate specifically to board/staff partnership.



Orthodox Belief #1: Association staff do not understand the field.

Staff partners bring unique expertise in how associations function and focus their full attention on how to best serve their organizations and stakeholders.



Orthodox Belief #2: Association staff does not understand the board's work.

Creating true board/staff partnership builds mutual understanding of the groups' shared and unique responsibilities.



Orthodox Belief #3: Association staff have their own agendas.

Bringing forward new ideas to strengthen the association's value creation and pursuing meaningful stakeholder innovation does not constitute an agenda.

Related Questions

Association board directors/officers should reflect on these three questions regarding board/staff partnership and discuss at least one at their next full board meeting.

Question #1 Why is genuine board/staff partnership the only way forward for our association?

Question #2 What are the specific and unique partnership responsibilities for our board and staff?

Question #3 How can our board and staff reach agreement to act in partnership?

Recommendation #5

Boards, Presiding Officers,
and Directors

Presiding Officers Accept Primary Responsibility for Board Performance

For every association presiding officer, there is no more important responsibility than ensuring the highest level of board performance. Regardless of title, board presiding officers must set and sustain a shared expectation for effective stewardship among their board colleagues.

Context

Board presiding officers, in their capacity as either association president or board chair, are expected to carry out various duties, including making committee/task force appointments, serving as an ambassador and spokesperson, and chairing board meetings. Among their many formal and informal functions, it is impossible to overstate the long-term beneficial impact of presiding officers taking primary responsibility for ensuring board high performance.

Concerns

Despite the need to orchestrate effective board performance, most presiding officers are not expected to take on this responsibility. The prevailing assumption is that chief staff executives (CSEs) will fill this role as part of their overall support of the board's work. With CSEs focused on elevating staff team performance, however, associations need board presiding officers to step up and focus their attention and energy on strengthening board stewardship.

Challenge to Association Board Presiding Officers

Association board presiding officers must accept primary responsibility for ensuring their boards are high performing. Working in concert with the CSE and other board officers, the board presiding officer must set clear expectations for board performance during the selection process, new director onboarding, and at every board meeting. The presiding officer also must have direct feedback conversations with underperforming directors/officers and ensure they receive the peer support they need to address their performance issues.

Related Orthodox Beliefs

Orthodox beliefs are the deep-seated assumptions we make about how the world works. The three orthodox beliefs listed below relate specifically to the responsibility of presiding officers for board performance.



Orthodox Belief #1: Presiding officers are volunteers with no experience in facilitating board performance.

The experience and insights gained through their service as a board director and in other officer roles helps prepare presiding officers to accept responsibility for board performance.



Orthodox Belief #2: Chief staff executives are responsible for board performance.

Chief staff executives can ensure that their presiding officers have access to the support they need to fulfill their board performance responsibilities.



Orthodox Belief #3: Presiding officers do not want to have difficult conversations with their board peers.

The privilege of serving as an association board chair or president demands the ability to make tough decisions and the willingness to have difficult yet necessary conversations.

Related Questions

Association board directors/officers should reflect on these three questions regarding the responsibility of presiding officers for board performance and discuss at least one at their next full board meeting.

Question #1 Why must our board's presiding officer fulfill their responsibility for board performance?

Question #2 What support does our presiding officer need to facilitate their responsibility for board performance?

Question #3 How can our presiding officer work with the CSE and other officers to strengthen board performance?

Recommendation #6

Boards, Presiding Officers,
and Directors

Board Directors Accept Responsibility for Elevating Their Performance

Every current and future board director must be clear-eyed about the demands and expectations of association board service and the commitment required to prepare. Performing at the highest possible level as a board director begins long before joining the board, requires ongoing effort, and continues to be a daily responsibility after being seated.

Context

Even with presiding officers accepting primary responsibility for ensuring board high performance, it is the obligation of every association board director to participate constructively in the enduring process of building and strengthening board stewardship. Whatever the original source of motivation for directors to pursue board service, accompanying the choice to serve is the commitment to do so at the highest possible level.

Concerns

In organizations throughout the association community, inconsistent board director performance is a known issue. High-performing directors and officers must compensate for directors who underperform and yet there are rarely any consequences for failing to fulfill board service expectations and responsibilities. Internal board development activities often reinforce orthodox beliefs about board service and do not challenge directors to sustain high performance over time.

Challenge to Association Board Directors

Association board directors must accept personal responsibility for elevating their performance. Long before board service begins, every stakeholder considering a director role must ask hard questions about why they want to take on this huge responsibility and the risk exposure it creates. Internalizing a disciplined stewardship approach must start before pursuing board service and must be strengthened over time. Once seated, directors must follow established board performance expectations, act on feedback and guidance with intention, and offer help to board colleagues who need to elevate their performance.

Related Orthodox Beliefs

Orthodox beliefs are the deep-seated assumptions we make about how the world works. The three orthodox beliefs listed below relate specifically to the personal responsibility of board directors for elevating their performance.



Orthodox Belief #1: Directors do not prioritize their association board service.

Board directors make a choice to serve their associations, fields, stakeholders, and successors and this choice requires daily attention and sustained commitment to effective stewardship.



Orthodox Belief #2: The association board director's role is to opine.

The role of every association board director is to apply their experience, expertise, and judgment to the evaluation of facts and information and make tough stewardship-centered decisions with their peers and colleagues.



Orthodox Belief #3: Association board presiding officers are first among equals.

The additional authority and responsibility of board presiding officers does not require board directors to show excessive deference nor does it reduce their obligation to perform at the highest possible level in their roles.

Related Questions

Association board directors/officers should reflect on these three questions regarding the responsibility of board directors for elevating their performance and discuss at least one at their next full board meeting.

Question #1

Why are some directors on our board struggling with their performance?

Question #2

What problems do we need to solve to help directors strengthen their performance?

Question #3

How can directors/officers support each other to enable more effective board stewardship?

Recommendation #7

CSEs, CXOs/Senior Teams,
and Voluntary Governing
Contributors

CSEs Expect Board/ CSE Interdependence

Association chief staff executives (CSEs) need a higher level of support from their boards. Consistent with creating genuine board partnership with the full association staff, CSEs and boards must establish mutual reciprocity and trust to enable strong board stewardship and positive CSE action on behalf of the association.

Context

In a world of intensifying systemic upheaval, risks and problems, it is crucial for both CSEs and their boards to transcend secondary forms of interference with their fundamental responsibilities to one another. The attention, energy, and time resources of these senior decision-makers are essential and invaluable, and must be directed with maximum care toward both board stewardship and CSE action in shared service of the association, the field, and stakeholders and successors.

Concerns

The frayed working relationships that exist between many association boards and CSEs are an unfortunate source of stress (and sometimes distress) for everyone involved. After more than 60 months of relentless turbulence with no clear end in sight, the mental and physical wellbeing of CSEs and board directors/officers demands that the dynamics of these relationships shift in a different and more collaborative direction.

Challenge to Association Chief Staff Executives

Association CSEs should set the expectation of an interdependent relationship with their boards. Boards and CEOs rely on each other to fulfill their responsibilities and perform their roles in the context of shared purpose and clear intention. Recognizing and acting on the need for deep trust and a commitment to reciprocity in the board/CSE relationship enables boards to serve as more effective stewards and provides CSEs with a strong basis for acting in the long-term interests of the association and the human beings it serves.

Related Orthodox Beliefs

Orthodox beliefs are the deep-seated assumptions we make about how the world works. The three orthodox beliefs listed below relate specifically to the CSE setting an expectation of board/CSE interdependence.



Orthodox Belief #1: Association boards are “the bosses” of their CSEs.

The board’s oversight and CSE performance evaluation functions are two elements of a more expansive board/CSE relationship that must be grounded in deep trust and a mutual commitment to reciprocity.



Orthodox Belief #2: Association boards know better what the association needs.

The CSE’s independent experience and expertise in the dynamics and issues of association management complements the industry/professional experience and expertise of board directors/officers.



Orthodox Belief #3: CSEs are highly compensated to carry their burdens.

Providing appropriate compensation for the CSE’s work does not justify withholding other forms of necessary support that can facilitate effective performance by both the board and CSE.

Related Questions

Association board directors/officers should reflect on these three questions regarding the CSE setting an expectation of board/CSE interdependence and discuss at least one at their next full board meeting.

Question #1 Why do we not already recognize board/CSE interdependence?

Question #2 What barriers have we built to realizing true board/CSE interdependence?

Question #3 How can our board and CSE work together to establish an interdependent relationship?

Recommendation #8

CSEs, CXOs/Senior Teams,
and Voluntary Governing
Contributors

CXOs/Senior Teams are “Board Ready”

To make a meaningful impact on the board’s work, association CXOs and senior teams must develop a fully “board-ready” practice. In addition to advising boards on issues within their specific functional or portfolio roles, senior executives should make critical contributions to board stewardship and foresight.

Context

The domain expertise and knowledge shared by functional or portfolio chief officers (CXOs) and senior teams is a crucial substantive contribution to the board’s intentional learning process. With the need for association boards to devote greater attention to long-term thinking and action, CXOs and senior teams also must be prepared to offer additional insights and actionable intelligence based on professional experience and judgment, and their own intentional learning.

Concerns

The focus on the board/CSE relationship can divert attention away from the vital roles played by CXOs and senior teams. Boards do not always see CXOs as advisors who are essential to their work. Senior teams do not always feel comfortable providing the higher-level guidance that boards require to make tough stewardship decisions. CXOs/senior teams can develop closer advisory relationships with their boards by framing their contributions in a board-ready way.

Challenge to Association CXOs/Senior Teams

Association CXOs/senior teams should develop their “board-ready” practice. Being board ready begins with a clear understanding of the conversations the board must have and the curation and presentation of information in ways that enable the board’s intentional learning, including decision-making, for beneficial outcomes. Through board-ready practice, and in concert with the CSE, CXOs/senior teams also can help shift board perspectives toward foresight and long-term action, and assist with reframing board decisions in stewardship terms.

Related Orthodox Beliefs

Orthodox beliefs are the deep-seated assumptions we make about how the world works. The three orthodox beliefs listed below relate specifically to CXOs/senior teams being “board ready.”



Orthodox Belief #1: Association boards prefer to interact only with the CSE.

To address the full range of complex issues and questions confronting their associations, boards must listen closely to the knowledgeable perspectives of their most senior staff advisors.



Orthodox Belief #2: Board/CSE relationship dynamics prevent full contribution by CXOs/senior teams.

Instead of expecting CXOs/senior teams to choose sides in their relationship difficulties, boards and CSEs must find ways to adapt themselves and provide greater latitude for senior management contributions.



Orthodox Belief #3: CXOs are not comfortable advising boards beyond their domain expertise.

CXOs/senior teams can build on their domain expertise through intentional learning and develop new capacity to provide advice and guidance to their boards, CSEs, and other governing contributors.

Related Questions

Association board directors/officers should reflect on these three questions regarding CXOs/senior teams being “board ready” and discuss at least one at their next full board meeting.

Question #1

Why does our board need the CXOs/senior team to be “board ready?”

Question #2

What obstacles may have prevented our CXOs/senior team from operating in a board-ready manner?

Question #3

How can our CXOs/senior team work with the board and the CSE to become board ready?

Recommendation #9

CSEs, CXOs/Senior Teams,
and Voluntary Governing
Contributors

Voluntary Governing Contributors Demonstrate Support for Boards

Voluntary governing contributors involved with work that supports the board, including committees and task forces, also must demonstrate support for the board.

Association board service is a difficult burden to carry, and by working together, all governing contributors can help lessen that burden and elevate board performance.

Context

Once again, association boards will not navigate their organizations through the rest of this decade and into the 2030s on their own. Fulfilling their stewardship responsibilities requires significant support from participants in every part of the association's governing structure. This includes voluntary contributors serving on committees, task forces, and similar groups, all of whom have valuable roles to play in the work of association stewardship.

Concerns

While committee and task force charges may provide governing contributors with a foundational understanding that their efforts provide valuable inputs to the board, they may still be unsure how what they do advances board stewardship. This ambiguity, along with limited direct board communication, can create disillusionment and weaken much-needed solidarity. CSEs and other staff partners must work closely with these contributors to address concerns and ensure they are fully supportive of the board and its work.

Challenge to Association Voluntary Governing Contributors

Voluntary governing contributors must demonstrate support for the board. As powerful forces of turbulence continue to intensify, boards need strong stakeholder support to maintain focus and stability as they act on behalf of their associations. There is considerable value in thoughtful dissent that challenges decision-makers to think and act beyond orthodox beliefs. It is critical, however, to prevent internal conflict created through uncertainty or confusion. Governing contributors can reinforce their board support by collaborating with staff partners to address misunderstanding, solve problems, and work toward shared clarity.

Related Orthodox Beliefs

Orthodox beliefs are the deep-seated assumptions we make about how the world works. The three orthodox beliefs listed below relate specifically to voluntary governing contributors demonstrating support for boards.



Orthodox Belief #1: Association boards can function without the work of voluntary governing contributors.

The creation of board-ready information and insights by association committees, task forces, and similar groups facilitates more focused board conversations and more effective decision-making.



Orthodox Belief #2: Boards have no responsibility to committees and task forces.

Boards, staff partners, and committees/task forces bear equal responsibility for building and sustaining an effective collaboration that advances the association.



Orthodox Belief #3: The support of governing contributors for the board is not important.

The extended networks of voluntary governing contributors offer boards a valuable channel for communications and engagement with various association stakeholders.

Related Questions

Association board directors/officers should reflect on these three questions regarding voluntary governing contributors showing support for boards and discuss at least one at their next full board meeting.

Question #1

Why does our board need the support of voluntary governing contributors?

Question #2

What have we done (or failed to do) that would result in the loss of support from voluntary governing contributors for board stewardship?

Question #3

How can we reciprocate board support for our voluntary governing contributors as they support us?

Next Practices for Elevating Association Board Performance

To help association boards, CSEs and staff partners, and other governing contributors take action on the nine FAB Report recommendations, these two pages share “next practices,” which are forward-looking approaches and ideas designed to challenge and liberate associations from their orthodox beliefs while inspiring new thinking and action among association decision-makers. (These next practices are listed in alphabetical order.)

Board-ready information provides boards with the essential content and context they need, communicated in a clear, reasoned, and thoughtful manner, to facilitate the best possible work from all contributors and the most effective decision-making for the board.

Board size equation calculates an appropriate number of board directors based on the number of board officers to ensure a two-thirds supermajority of directors, i.e., three officers x 2 equals six directors (board size of 9), four officers x 2 equals eight directors (board size of 12), and five officers x 2 equals ten directors (board size of 15). Add 3–5 public directors to reach an absolute minimum (board size of 12) and an absolute maximum (board size of 20).

Commitment to ethical purpose replaces separate vision and mission statements with one focused purposeful organizational commitment that situates the association’s reason for being and its most important work in the world in an ethical context.

Confidence-building measures refers to mutually-beneficial agreements or actions that can help dispel misunderstanding, nurture greater solidarity, and create a more trusted context for long-term coordination, cooperation, and collaboration among diverse stakeholders who may otherwise remain more committed to advancing specific short-term agendas.

Consent-first board agendas place all board meeting items on the consent agenda and challenge board directors/officers to choose, within agreed-upon constraints, the most important items for board attention, conversation, and intentional learning.

Director experience is a holistic perspective on elevating board performance by designing a robust and integrative experience for directors/officers that begins at the identification, recruitment, and selection, and continues through every phase of board service.

Dissent agendas allow boards to track conversations in which directors disagree with one another and create a container for holding dissent within and between in-person/virtual board meetings. Boards can use this next practice to transform dissent into an intentional learning resource that strengthens their performance.

Dissent as an intentional learning resource is the equitable process of sharing contrarian or divergent perspectives to push back on orthodox beliefs, ask more challenging questions, and infuse the board's decision-making process with fresh thinking.

The duty of foresight requires association boards to stand up for their successors' futures through intentional learning, short-term sacrifice, and long-term action. The duty of foresight is a choice association boards make based on shared humanity rather than a legal mandate.

Foresight networks are connected groups of internal and external contributors who collaborate to assist boards with the ongoing work of foresight by exploring and framing the issues created by plausible futures and answering board questions about emerging issues.

Governing intent is a specific expression of the outcomes the association's board will work to achieve through stewardship consistent with the organization's commitment to ethical purpose and consonant with its strategic direction.

Guiding principles of action build a shared understanding among boards, staff partners, and other governing contributors around the association's overarching decision-making priorities and create a framework for making effective decisions grounded in ethical purpose.

Intentional learning is an individual and/or collective cycle of 1) sense-making, i.e., building an understanding of an issue or question, 2) meaning-making, i.e., identifying ethical, human, and other implications, and 3) decision-making, i.e., choosing how to address the issue or question and create more opportunities for intentional learning.

Officer teams are an alternative structure for collaboration among board officers and the CSE that replace executive committees, maintain the benefits of coordination, and eliminate the authority to make decisions or take actions on behalf of the full board.

Public directors are individuals outside the association who are ineligible for membership and are appointed to serve on the board based on their experience, expertise, or other personal/professional attributes that can benefit the association and the board.

Risk principles are linked to guiding principles of action and enable boards and CSEs to identify risk orthodoxies, build a deeper structure of thinking around the association's risk concerns, and create a shared risk orientation that provides a solid foundation for long-term decision-making.

Strategy as a process of learning is an approach to setting organizational direction grounded in thinking and acting beyond orthodoxy, building an empathic understanding of stakeholder concerns, and applying ongoing learning to stakeholder value creation/co-creation.

Thinking and acting beyond orthodoxy is an intentional practice of interrogating the association's orthodox beliefs, i.e., the deep-seated assumptions we make about how the world works, and replacing them with the justified beliefs that enable long-term action.

Thank you to our contributors!

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