

Improving School Board Effectiveness: There Is No Alternative

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SYNOPSIS

The importance of School Board effectiveness cannot be over-emphasised. Although details of the organisational structures of Boards vary from school to school, there are common features that characterise highly effective Boards, just as there are easily identifiable characteristics of dysfunctional Boards. A key element of Board effectiveness, and a common element of most models of Board governance, is the functional separation of the roles of governance and management.

Drawing upon extensive research and personal experience, Dr Stephen Codrington proposes a framework of five dimensions to articulate 'best practice' in not-for-profit Board governance. After highlighting the pivotal importance of a healthy Board-Head relationship, a strong case is made for the importance of Boards to engage in regular training and evaluation if the effectiveness of their work is to be optimised.

On a blank sheet of paper, everything is possible.

With the exception of the Boards of new schools, almost no School Board finds itself with the challenging luxury of starting work with a metaphorical blank sheet of paper. Most School Boards inherit a myriad of policies, practices, procedures and personal relationships that represent its culture and operation. Unfortunately, some of these factors can limit the effective functioning of the Board.

This paper rests on a very simple assumption: that School Boards wish to be as effective as possible.

It follows from this assumption that any factor *inhibiting* a Board's effectiveness is a barrier that should be removed wherever possible, and that procedures, policies and practices which *enhance* Board effectiveness should be embraced whenever possible.

Two additional assumptions inform this paper: that each school has its own unique culture, and that School Boards operate in a climate that is quite different from Boards in the corporate sector.

BOARD STRUCTURES

The Board is the ultimate decision making authority for a school. Although a Board's power is limited by legal requirements and regulations, the Board is the most powerful entity within a school. Through their actions, policies, structures, procedures and words, Boards have all the power required to determine whether a school succeeds or fails. In the words of author John Carver (2006, p.27):

"Boards are at the extreme end of the accountability chain. Other managers must deal with persons both above and below their station. The buck stops with the Board. It has no supervisor to carve out what portion of a given topic it is to oversee".

Most Boards govern schools that have been set up as not-for-profit organisations. Proprietary schools that operate for profit often have Boards with different objectives and structures, and are not the specific focus of this paper.

Boards typically operate through a number of committees such as finance, compensation, nominating and governance, audit and risk, facilities and advancement committees, to name a few. The purpose of committees is to scrutinise, research and develop proposals and data in order to frame recommendations for consideration by the Board. When the committee structure functions well and when committees have earned the trust of the Board as a whole, Board meetings can operate quickly and efficiently, thus avoiding becoming bogged down in tedious

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minutiae. However, it is important to remember that committees do not make formal decisions; they review information and data to make recommendations to the Board, which is where all authority for decision making on governance matters is centred.

Accountability And Responsibility Structures

Each Board committee will usually receive reports from at least one member of the Senior Management Team at each meeting and will ask relevant questions, which is how Board committees exercise their role in governance. For example, the CFO (Chief Financial Officer, or Bursar) will report to the finance committee, the Development (or Advancement) Director will report to the development (or advancement) committee, and so on.

The Board is responsible for the recruitment and direction of the Head, and then the Head is ultimately responsible for the effectiveness of all management operations within the school. Therefore it follows that the Head should be the only employee who is directly accountable to the Board as a whole, although this should not prevent other employees presenting information to the Board by invitation. The Bursar may often also be a sitting member of the

Board, so Heads should always seek to know and understand the reporting lines for the Bursar. It is worth noting that Boards can also be responsible for the appointing of a school Chaplain, although the Chaplain will rarely sit on the Board.

If these relationships are properly structured and working as they are designed to do, there will be an effective interactive relationship between the Board and Management, using the Head as the sole conduit for communication of this relationship (figure 1). Accountability will flow from Management to the Board, and in return, responsibility will flow from the Board to Management.

It follows from this accountability framework that it is the Board which ultimately runs the school and determines its direction. The role of the Head and the Management Team is to run the day-to-day operations of the school in compliance with the vision and direction established (and hopefully articulated clearly) by the Board. The work of the Head and the Management Team is conducted under what is, in effect, the delegated authority of the Board.

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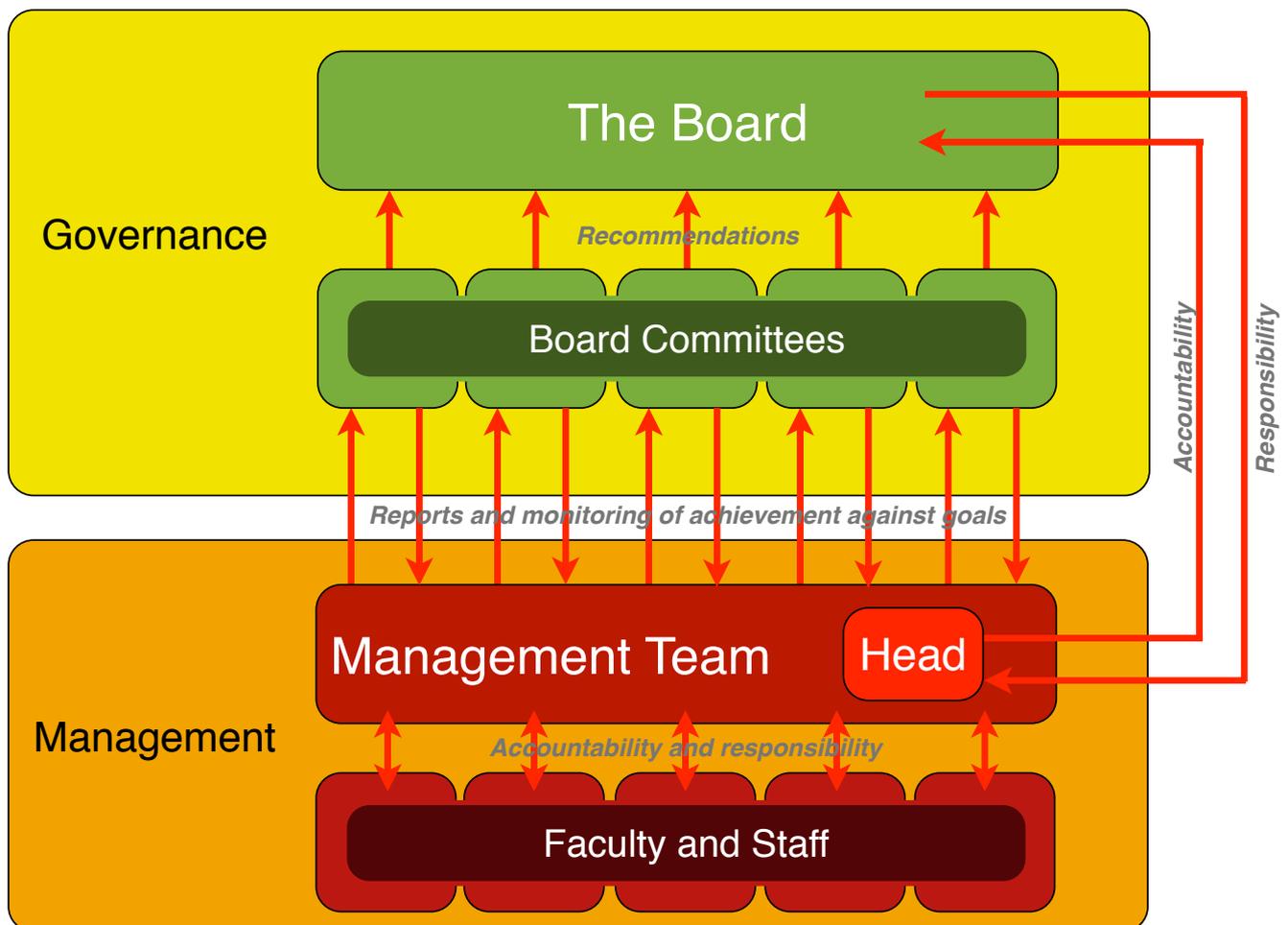


Figure 1 – The accountability-responsibility relationship between governance and management

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY BOARD EFFECTIVENESS?

Board effectiveness can be defined as the success of the Board in fulfilling its purpose, which is to *govern* the school. This role is clearly separate from the role of the Head and the Senior Management of the school, which is to *manage* the school.¹

"Governance is the Board's legal authority to exercise power and authority over an organisation on behalf of the community it serves" (BoardSource, 2010, p. 15). Governance is a collective, or group action. Trustees do not govern an organisation as individuals, but when the Board meets as a group, makes collective decisions and speaks with a collective voice, it does so with authority.

"Governance is a collective, or group action."

The separation of governance and management lies at the heart of effective leadership in schools. At its most basic level, the Board's role (governance) is to set the mission, vision and direction for the school, and ensure that these are achieved, while the Head's role (management) is to ensure that the mission, vision and direction as set by the Board are implemented effectively. In this way, governance and management work coherently in teamwork to achieve common goals that enhance the welfare of the students, parents, faculty and staff to the greatest extent possible.

It follows from this that a clear separation of power and authority is needed between the Board and the Head. A strong Board and a strong Head working in partnership will be a formidable combination in achieving effective outcomes for a school. This should be viewed as a partnership between equally strong roles rather than a balance of competing strengths, which would imply an adversarial relationship that needs to be managed.

If the roles of governance and management are clearly defined and articulated as a separation of responsibilities working towards a common goal, then a key foundation for effective Board operations will have been established.

CARVER'S MODEL OF GOVERNANCE

John Carver's governance model, also known by its registered name 'Policy Governance', has been popular in many schools since the 1990s (Carver, 2006; Cummins & Crawley, 2012, p. 92; Faisandier, 2003, pp. 1-2). The popularity of the model arises from its clear distinction between the roles of governance and management and its clarity in articulating a framework for its implementation.

Carver believes that effective governance rests on four assumptions (1995):

1. The Board is an official body and exists to own the business as a trusteeship. Thus, the Board does not exist for the faculty and staff to tell it what it needs – it is the Board's role to give the lead;
2. The Board must function cohesively as a group (governance is a collective or group action);
3. Boards should speak officially to faculty and staff only through the Head of School; and
4. The Board should control without meddling.

Ends Or Means Decisions?

Carver makes an important distinction between two types of decisions: "ends decisions" (goals or purposes) and "means decisions" (means or procedures to achieve the ends). "Ends decisions" focus on outcomes in the context of the impact on recipients, costs and value. "Means decisions" focus on activities, curriculum, programs, methods, conduct and services.

Carver believes that many Boards spend too much time discussing means rather than ends. He believes that when the Board deals with goals, it should do so positively, setting goals by asking questions such as 'what ends do

we want?', 'who should benefit?', 'what will be the worth?', and so on. On the other hand, the Board should define the means to achieve the ends negatively, which involves clearly articulating the means that are not acceptable prior to an action being taken. This will allow the Management to operate freely within these defined boundaries to achieve the ends that have been identified.

However, while the Board leaves the management of the school to the Head and the Executive staff, the Board needs to look at the "means decisions" that affect its own operations. Therefore, the Board should examine its own governing processes (its ways of operating, its self-discipline, its self-evaluation, etc), as well as the nature of its formal relationships to the Head, the faculty and the staff.

Carver thus argues that there are only four areas with which a Board should be concerned:

- › Ends decisions policies
- › The executive limits (boundaries) to achieving these ends *... to be decided by the Board and articulated to the Head*
- › The processes of governance *... to be decided by the Board and articulated to itself*
- › Links between the Board and the Head, faculty and staff

Carver argues that the Board should speak at the broadest level possible in each of these four areas before it considers anything at a detailed level. He believes that it is more important for the Board to be 'complete' than 'deep'. Only after the Board has achieved this complete overview at the broadest level should it come in, one step at a time, to look at the detail. This requires discipline on the part of Trustees not to become too involved with certain pet issues or to break Board solidarity by speaking out as individuals. Carver believes that the Board can have effective control without narrowing the limits imposed upon the Head and the Executive Team very much, and he believes that this is a desirable situation as it gives the Head and the school freedom to develop initiatives.

It is important to remember that although the Board delegates the "means decisions" for the school's operations to the Head and Management Team, the Board always remains accountable for the outcomes of those delegated decisions, just as the Board is ultimately accountable for everything that happens in the school.

Strengths And Constraints Of Carver's Model

In its distinction of "ends decisions" from "means decisions", and its explanation of how each should be attended to by the School Board, Carver's model is very helpful. However, it is not without its critics. Some argue that Carver's model is

¹ See Carver (2006), Council of International Schools (2013), and Littleford (2010). On the other hand, Trower (2013) acknowledges that in reality the clarity of the roles is often blurred.

unrealistically dichotomous in separating the roles of governance and management, leaving Trustees vulnerable to neglecting obligations that they have from legal and fiduciary duty perspectives (e.g. Carter, 2002, pp.64, 98). Benoit lists several additional criticisms, notably that:

- The model works better for large organisations than smaller ones,
- It places too much pressure on the Head and the Management Team,
- It can lead to disconnection of the Board from the school,
- It requires sophisticated/professional Trustees who like accountability, and
- It is not always possible to separate 'ends' from 'means' (Benoit, 2002, p. 20).

Hough lists several other criticisms (several of which he claims not to accept fully), such as:

- The model offering no guarantee that things can't go wrong,
- The model being based on top-down assumptions of organisational structure,
- The need for Boards to be involved in management to some extent,
- The notion that governance cannot be distinguished from management,
- Lack of empirical research into the model's operation, and
- The model's assumption of "heroic Boards and perfect CEOs", among others (Hough, 2002, pp.3-12).

SIGNS OF A DYSFUNCTIONAL BOARD

There are many other models of governance that have been designed for non-profit organisations, and which are therefore applicable to schools (e.g. Walser, 2013, pp. 42-47; Trower, 2013, pp. 1-19). However, very few models of governance are based on a thorough review of 'best practice' for effective governance in schools. The rest of this paper proposes such a model.

Carver acknowledges the important point that even the best model of governance cannot ensure "sagacious, farsighted, humane decision making" (Carver, 2006, p. 340). No set of policies and no procedural framework can prevent Trustees making poor decisions.

Yet setting aside Board decisions that are overtly ill-advised, the sad reality is that many School Boards operate sub-optimally.

Let us assume that all Trustees sit on their School Board with a sense of goodwill and the objective of serving what they see as being the best interests of the school. Hopefully, this is a realistic assumption, and if it is, what could possibly go wrong? Unfortunately, experience and reality suggest that there are numerous possibilities, some involving the characteristics of individual Trustees and others involving problematic Board dynamics.

Research by Goodman *et.al.* (1997) has established that dysfunctional School Boards not only make the process of governance difficult and frustrating for everyone involved, but they have an adverse impact on the achievement levels of students in the school. They found that poor governance was characterised by:

- Micro-management by the Board;
- Role confusion between the Board and the Head;

- Interpersonal conflict between the Chair and the Head;
- Poor communication by the Head to the Board;
- Lack of trust and respect between the Head and the Board;
- Bickering among Trustees or between Trustees and the Head;
- Trustee actions reflecting their personal interests;
- Trustees disregarding the agenda process and the chain-of-command;
- Trustees playing to the news media; and
- Limited commitment by Trustees to improving governance (Goodman *et.al.*, 1997, cited in Land, 2002, pp. 19-20).

Before we proceed to consider a model for effective governance, consider carrying out a self-diagnosis of your Board effectiveness by using the checklists of 'Problem Trustees' and 'Problematic Board Dynamics' in appendix 1 to identify some of the reasons why your Board may be operating sub-optimally.

THE HIGHLY EFFECTIVE BOARD

Having outlined some of the possible causes of sub-optimal Board and Trustee effectiveness, it is helpful to identify the characteristics of highly effective Boards that are served well by a group of productive Trustees.

There are many books and articles containing articulations of the characteristics of effective non-profit Boards in varying levels of detail. Unfortunately for School Boards, there are significantly fewer statements that apply to the education sector than apply to other spheres.²

Goodman *et.al.* identified the elements of high quality governance as follows:

- Focus by the Board on student achievement and policy;
- Effective management by the Board without micromanagement;
- A trusting and collaborative relationship between the Board and Head;
- Creation by the Board of conditions and structures that allowed the Head to function as the CEO and instructional leader;
- Evaluation of the Head according to mutually agreed procedures;
- Effective communication between the Board Chair and Head, and among Board Members;
- Effective Board communication with the community;
- Board adoption of a budget that provided needed resources;
- Governance retreats for evaluation and goal setting purposes;
- Regular School Board meetings for which the Head drafted the agenda; and
- Long-term service of Board members and Heads (Goodman *et.al.*, 1997, cited in Land, 2002, p. 19).

The Exceptional Board

BoardSource (a US organisation with the mission of building non-profit Boards and encouraging Board service) draws the important distinction between a responsible Board and an exceptional Board (2010, pp. 21-25). The difference is explained as follows:

"If a board neglects the full range of its responsibilities, it may preclude the organization from reaching its potential. An exceptional board recognizes

"Dysfunctional Boards have an adverse impact on student achievement levels."

the impact of its leadership, and board members (trustees) understand that they must be thoughtful and engaged leaders – not merely competent but passive stewards [...]

(We can) distinguish between responsible boards and exceptional boards. A responsible board is capable and dutiful in carrying out its responsibilities. A responsible board understands its fiduciary responsibilities, and it adds value to the organization by approving strategic plans and budgets, regularly reviewing financial statements, evaluating the chief executive (Head) annually, and participating in fundraising.

An exceptional board operates on a higher level [...] (They) measure organizational impact and evaluate their own performance, discuss and debate issues, and open doors and make connections. The difference between responsible and exceptional lies in thoughtfulness and intentionality, action and engagement, knowledge and communication”.

A comparison of the behaviour of responsible and exceptional Boards is summarised in table 1 (see p.6).

FIVE DIMENSIONS OF EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE

The comprehensive framework that follows is designed to build upon established research into effective governance and extend it to articulate a more comprehensive picture of the characteristics of effective School Boards. Although the details of this framework will need to be varied to suit the governance structures of individual schools, the framework is based on the

author’s experience together with a thorough review of relevant literature on the common characteristics of effective Boards and the ways these are expressed in ‘best practice’.³

It is proposed here that there are **five dimensions of effective Board performance**, these being:

- (a) **Outcomes**
The Board has a good track record of achievement
- (b) **Processes**
The Board uses the best processes available
- (c) **Community Engagement**
The Board engages with and satisfies our community’s expectations
- (d) **Ethos**
The Board enhances our school’s ethos and supports its values
- (e) **Strategic Intent**
The Board is aligned with and contributes to our school’s goals

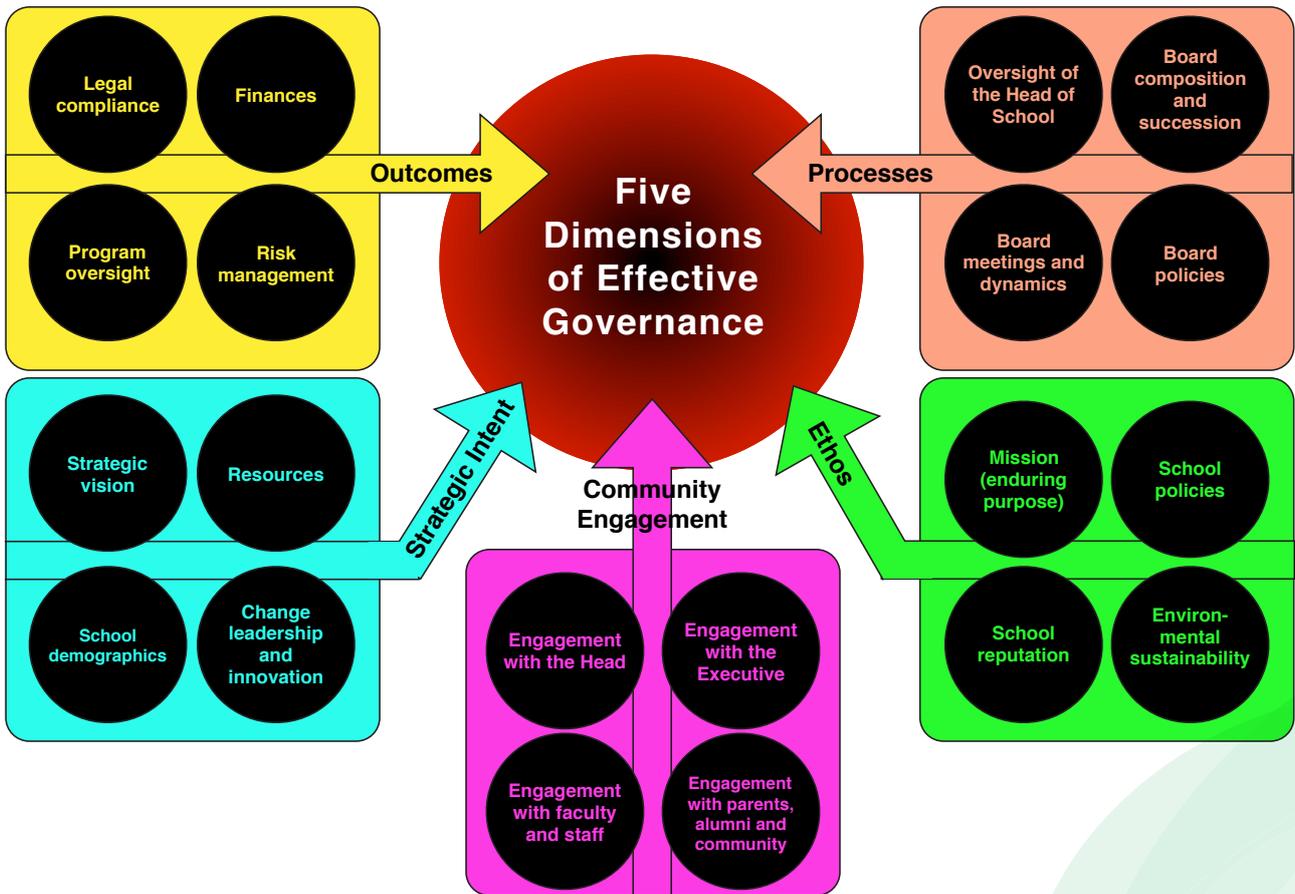


Figure 2 – The Five Dimensions of Effective Governance.

² Examples of evaluation tools for educational Boards can be found in Walsler (2013), Trower (2013), BoardSource (2010), Dalhousie University (2008), North Dakota School Boards Association (n.d.), Oregon School Boards Association (2009).

Table 1 – Responsible Boards and Exceptional Boards

| RESPONSIBLE BOARDS | EXCEPTIONAL BOARDS |
|---|---|
| Establish and review strategic plans. | Allocate time at meetings and between meetings to address what matters most and engage in strategic thinking on a regular basis. |
| Adopt a conflict-of-interest policy. | Adopt a conflict-of-interest policy that includes guidelines for disclosure, review, and recusal; require Board Members to sign the conflict-of-interest statement annually; and rigorously adhere to the policy. |
| Monitor financial performance and receive programmatic updates. | Measure overall organisational efficiency, effectiveness, and impact using various tools including dashboards. |
| Design Board meetings to accomplish the work of the Board. | Make meetings matter by improving meeting efficiency, using consent agendas and meeting regularly in executive sessions – with and without the Chief Executive – to allow for confidential discussion. |
| Orient new Board Members. | Invest in ongoing Board development to deepen the commitment of Board Members, and have Board Members reflect on their own performance by conducting regular Board self-assessments. |

Source: BoardSource (2010), p.25

"If a Board neglects the full range of its responsibilities, it may preclude the organisation from reaching its potential"
 (BoardSource, 2010, p. 21)

The structure in figure 2 can be extended to provide a framework to describe the characteristics and practices of a highly effective Board in which each dimension is measured against 'best practice' criteria of specific domains.

For example, the five domains of the CIRCLE Evaluation Framework (Cummins & Crawley, 2012, pp. 56-75) mesh very well with this approach. These are:

- (a) **Achievement**
Does the Board achieve good results?
- (b) **Relationships**
Does the Board build good relationships?
- (c) **Communications**
Does the Board communicate well?
- (d) **Initiatives**
Does the Board plan for, implement and achieve programs and initiatives well?
- (e) **Reputation**
Does the Board have a good reputation and enhance its reputation?

Combined with the five dimensions of effective Board governance, these five domains enable a grid to be constructed as shown in figure 3.

By inserting the criteria required to achieve best practice into each of the 100 cells of the dashboard, a description (organised by five dimensions and five domains) can be generated that describes the highly effective Board. To illustrate this concept in practice, figure 4 (see p.8) shows a sample set of ten descriptors for the five cells of one of the 20 sub-dimensions (Ethos: Mission) of the dashboard, which has been fully developed by CIRCLE Governance.

In the framework described in figure 3, no dimension or domain is innately more or less important than any other. Drawing on the framework developed by Chait et.al. (2005, pp. 33-136), Trower (2013, pp. 4-14) expands this by emphasising the need for Boards to be involved at three levels of governance in order to be fully effective, these being:

- **Basic Fiduciary Governance** – stewardship of assets
- **Strategic Governance** – which involves complex, 'big picture' thinking
- **Generative Governance** – which could be summarised as metacognitive reflection

According to Walser (2013, pp. 5-6), there are six key characteristics of "well-governed" schools that are associated with above average student achievement:

1. **Stability** (Trustees served at least six to eight years) and a desire to serve students rather than seek high office;
2. **Short regular meetings** coupled with annual or biannual goal setting retreats;
3. **Effective self-management** that resulted in referring complaints to the Head, lack of separate sub-committees, and joint discussion of problems with the Head;
4. **A communicative Board Chair** who functioned as a critical go-between between the Head and the Board;

| | | ACHIEVEMENT <i>Does the board achieve good results?</i> | RELATIONSHIPS <i>Does the board build good relationships?</i> | COMMUNICATION <i>Does the board communicate well?</i> | INITIATIVES <i>Does the board plan for, implement and achieve programs and initiatives well?</i> | REPUTATION <i>Does the board have a good reputation and enhance its reputation?</i> |
|--|--|---|---|---|--|---|
| OUTCOMES The board has a good track record of achievement | Legal compliance | | | | | |
| | Finances | | | | | |
| | Program oversight | | | | | |
| | Effective risk management | | | | | |
| PROCESSES The board uses the best processes available | Oversight of the Head of School | | | | | |
| | Board composition and succession | | | | | |
| | Board meetings / dynamics (including committees) | | | | | |
| | Board policies | | | | | |
| COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT The board engages with and satisfies our community's expectations | Engagement with the Head | | | | | |
| | Engagement with the Executive | | | | | |
| | Engagement with the faculty and staff | | | | | |
| | Engagement with parents, alumni and community | | | | | |
| ETHOS The board enhances our school's ethos and supports its values | Mission (enduring purpose) | | | | | |
| | School policies | | | | | |
| | School reputation | | | | | |
| | Environmental sustainability | | | | | |
| STRATEGIC INTENT The board is aligned with and contributes to our school's goals | Strategic vision | | | | | |
| | Resources | | | | | |
| | School demographics | | | | | |
| | Change Leadership and Innovation | | | | | |

Figure 3 – Dashboard framework to describe 'best practice' in Board governance.

| | | ACHIEVEMENT <i>Does the board achieve good results?</i> | RELATIONSHIPS <i>Does the board build good relationships?</i> | COMMUNICATION <i>Does the board communicate well?</i> | INITIATIVES <i>Does the board plan for, implement and achieve programs and initiatives well?</i> | REPUTATION <i>Does the board have a good reputation and enhance its reputation?</i> |
|---|-----------------------------------|---|--|--|--|---|
| ETHOS The board enhances our school's ethos and supports its values | MISSION (ENDURING PURPOSE) | <p>The board develops, articulates and upholds the mission</p> <p>All trustees understand and support the current mission statement</p> <p>The board effectively measures the school's success in implementing its mission, and it promotes corrective action if deficiencies are evident</p> | <p>All trustees are familiar with the current mission statement</p> <p>The board holds the school, through its Head, responsible for achieving its mission</p> | All trustees have participated in discussions to review and deepen their understanding of the school's mission | <p>The board has a formal process (such as regular retreats) to foster active board participation in examining mission-related issues</p> <p>The board's decisions support and advance the mission</p> <p>The current mission statement is appropriate for the school's role in the next few years</p> | Trustees can clearly articulate the school's mission |

Figure 4 – An example of 'best practice' descriptors arranged by domain.

| | | ACHIEVEMENT <i>Does the board achieve good results?</i> | RELATIONSHIPS <i>Does the board build good relationships?</i> | COMMUNICATION <i>Does the board communicate well?</i> | INITIATIVES <i>Does the board plan for, implement and achieve programs and initiatives well?</i> | REPUTATION <i>Does the board have a good reputation and enhance its reputation?</i> |
|---|--|--|---|---|--|--|
| PROCESSES The board uses the best processes available | OVERSIGHT OF THE HEAD OF SCHOOL | The Head is the only employee in the school with direct accountability and responsibility to the board | <p>The Head has a clear, current contract with the board, the terms of which are honoured by both sides</p> <p>The respective roles of the board and Head are defined, articulated, understood and mutually respected</p> | <p>The outcomes of the Head's annual evaluation are communicated in writing to the Head</p> <p>The Head is given a fair opportunity to provide frank feedback to the board on its oversight of the Head</p> | <p>A mutually agreed set of goals is developed annually for the Head</p> <p>A fair and systematic evaluation of the Head's performance is conducted annually by the board, based upon a set of pre-determined, agreed goals or criteria</p> <p>The board regularly reviews the Head's compensation, and adjusts this appropriately as required</p> | <p>The board conducted its most recent search for a new Head in a competent and professional manner</p> <p>The board has adopted adequate policies for selecting of a new Head, providing appropriate professional development to the Head, nurturing the Head, and defining procedures in the event of conflict</p> |

Figure 5 – 'Best practice' in the sub-dimension of 'Oversight of the Head of School'.

5. **Focus on student achievement** as evidenced by policy, the budget, facilities, and support for the Head as the CEO and educational leader; and
6. **An ability to work collaboratively**, resulting in a high degree of trust.

It is significant that three of these six characteristics focus on the relationship between the Board and the Head of School. Many references rightly highlight the importance of this relationship for achieving effective governance (and indeed an effective school!). A typical example is the following:

"The relationship between the head of school and the board members (trustees), collectively and individually, is one of the most important determinants of the institution's strength and success [...] A well-functioning relationship between the board and head is marked by mutual respect, frequent communication, openness, and candour." (Chojnacki, 2007, p. 107)

In the same vein is another example:

"The relationship between the Governing Body of a school and its Principal (Head) is vitally important to the wellbeing and effective functioning of the school. Interviews of Principals and Chairs of school Boards across member schools indicated that the working relationship developed between the Principal and the Chair is central to building a cohesive leadership within the school. They emphasized the importance of building a positive partnership within clearly identified structures and processes and the need to provide support to the Principal in his/her role. The effectiveness of this partnership is dependent upon a positive, trusting and strong relationship which is mutually supportive, critically honest and challenging." (Penny & Jackson, 2005, p. 1)

In the dashboard framework for 'best practice' in Board governance (figure 3), two sub-dimensions describe the relationship between the Board and the Head. The first of these falls within the 'Process' dimension and refers to the Board's oversight of the Head (figure 5). The other sub-dimension falls within the 'Community Engagement' dimension, and covers the nature and dynamics of the Board's engagement with the Head (figure 6, see p.10).

Although the allocation of some of the 'best practice' indicators to particular cells is somewhat arbitrary because of the overlapping nature of the processes involved, a Board that follows all the points listed in figures 5 and 6, thus fulfilling its duty to support the Head, will almost certainly have a healthy, productive and happy Board-Head relationship.

The relationship between the Head and the Board has both formal and informal aspects. At the formal level, the relationship begins during the search phase to appoint a new Head, and while a search committee might be appointed to co-ordinate the search, the decision to appoint a new Head will be made collectively by the entire Board. Modelling best practice, the Board should offer a written contract that includes (a) the authority and responsibilities of the Head, (b) the terms of compensation, (c) the timing and process of annual evaluations, (d) the duration of the contract, with provisions for renewal and termination, and (e) a statement identifying the laws under which the contract is administered.

Establishing An Effective Board-Head Relationship

Each of these contract provisions becomes an important factor in the ongoing relationship between the Board and the Head. As outlined in figures 5 and 6, ongoing openness, trust and mutual confidence is required for the relationship to work effectively. A key element in ensuring an effective relationship is the personal

chemistry between the Chair and the Head. As Chojnacki states (2007, p. 125):

"It is critical that the Head and the Chair make every effort to establish a solid and mutually supportive relationship based on respect and trust, develop the capacity to be forthright and candid, and listen to and learn from each other's feedback. The Board Chair and the Head share the same goal: providing effective leadership for the school."

If the Chair-Head relationship deteriorates, this will almost certainly become a significant impediment to the Board's (and the Head's) effectiveness, as well as to morale and thus teacher performance, which in turn can adversely affect the educational outcomes of students in the school. A deterioration in the Chair-Head relationship can occur for a myriad of reasons, including:

- An overflow of factional Board politics,
- Unresolved personal or professional conflicts,
- Superficial or too infrequent communication,
- Disagreements over what constitutes ethical conduct,
- Blurring of the governance-management dichotomy,
- Poorly conducted appraisals of the Head by the Board,
- Public undermining of the Head by ill-disciplined Trustees (or ambitious senior staff),
- Simple incompetence on the part of either the Chair or the Head, or even
- Jealousy on the part of Trustees that the Chair-Head relationship has become too close.

Whatever the cause of a breakdown in trust, it is a situation that must be repaired as quickly as possible for the sake of everyone involved. This is one area where input from a neutral facilitator will almost certainly be more effective than any other approach. As the veteran consultant John Littleford comments, "mentoring Heads and Chairs is a useful, and sometimes even necessary form of outreach and an appropriate admission that the parties may not have all the answers. It is a signal of the avoidance of hubris, as the experience of others is sought." (2005, p. 4)

On a positive note, Richardson offers this advice to Heads:

"First and foremost, cultivate your relationship with the Chairman: absolutely crucial. Whilst you may not see eye to eye on everything, a united front in public and at board meetings should be preserved if at all possible. No man can serve two masters: the Chairman is in charge, and must be – both where the Head and the board itself is concerned." (2007, p. 115)

THE SOLUTION TO ENHANCING BOARD EFFECTIVENESS – BOARD TRAINING AND EVALUATION

Trustees on School Boards face a thankless task that is far more difficult than most observers imagine. Unlike the members of many corporate Boards, school Trustees are generally unpaid volunteers. They are dealing with a topic that is highly emotional (children's education), sometimes in an atmosphere that is politically charged (especially if some or all Trustees are elected) where a high degree of stakeholder (and sometimes public) transparency is expected. Moreover, a high proportion of the critics who observe Board actions consider themselves to be 'experts', if for no other reason than they attended school themselves – and in the case of alumni, the same school.

Within this culture of high expectations, it is hard to imagine any Trustee on a School Board being comfortable that untrained or unqualified teachers were being employed in the school. It

| | | ACHIEVEMENT <i>Does the board achieve good results?</i> | RELATIONSHIPS <i>Does the board build good relationships?</i> | COMMUNICATION <i>Does the board communicate well?</i> | INITIATIVES <i>Does the board plan for, implement and achieve programs and initiatives well?</i> | REPUTATION <i>Does the board have a good reputation and enhance its reputation?</i> |
|--|---------------------------------|--|--|---|---|--|
| COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT The board engages with and satisfies our community's expectations | ENGAGEMENT WITH THE HEAD | The board gives the Head the authority and responsibility as CEO to lead the executive, the faculty and the staff, and thus manage the school's operations and programs effectively, including the recruitment, assignment, orientation, deployment and appraisal of all faculty and staff The board provides oversight and evaluation of the Head The board, and all individual trustees, fulfil their responsibility to show public support for the Head during both good times and crises | There is a professional climate of mutual trust and respect between the board and the Head The Head and the Chair meet frequently to review (a) the state of the school, (b) progress made towards achieving goals, (c) any compelling problems or emerging issues, and (d) the Head's welfare, thus ensuring a 'no surprises' environment The board engages proactively with the Head to cultivate and maintain good relations with the Executive, faculty, parents, alumni and the general community | The respective roles of the board and Head are clearly defined, understood and respected The Head is the usual two-way conduit of communication between the board and the school's employees Trustees refer concerns and complaints to the Head rather than undermining the Head's role by engaging in such discussions in public | The board and the Head operate effectively in partnership to achieve program outcomes and explore potential initiatives | The board supports the Head when engaging with faculty, staff, parents and the public The board shows support for the Head by communicating the positive outcomes of the Head's evaluation annually to faculty, staff, alumni and parents |

Figure 6 – 'Best practice' in the sub-dimension of 'Engagement with the Head'.

is therefore surprising that not all School Boards in Australia and New Zealand regularly train their Trustees to perform the role of governance, especially given the critical importance of the Board's role and, as demonstrated through this paper, the significant difficulties that can arise if the role is not performed to a high standard of excellence.

School Boards in other parts of the world routinely conduct self-evaluations of their performance, and usually also evaluations involving neutral outsiders. In some countries this is a legislative requirement, but even where this is not the case, regular training and evaluation are often seen as the duty of a responsible Board (to use the less ambitious terminology of the two alternatives in table 1). BoardSource (2010, pp. 255-256) expresses the prevailing viewpoint in the United States in these words:

"Meaningful evaluation is a form of internal learning. When organisations conduct evaluation only to prove they've done what they said they would do, they miss a significant opportunity for mission achievement [...]"

The board's responsibility for evaluation focuses on measurement of organizational effectiveness; self-assessment for the full board; self-assessment for individual board members; and performance evaluation for the chief executive. The staff is responsible for evaluating an organisation's core programs, as well as areas such as fundraising, finance, marketing, and human resources. The board ensures that these assessments take place regularly, while respecting the clear boundaries between board and staff roles."

Evaluating For 'Best Practice'

One challenge that Boards face when undertaking an evaluation is being confident that they are examining a complete and comprehensive set of criteria that encapsulate the entirety of 'best practice'. This is an important consideration; as Dan Ariely (a professor of psychology and behavioral economics) pointed out in an article entitled, 'You are what you measure':

"Human beings will adjust behavior based on the metrics they're held against. What you measure is what you'll get." (2010, p. 38)

In other words, the components of any evaluation will drive the outcomes of those who are being evaluated. In the same way that this works in the classroom and with teacher evaluation, it follows that a comprehensive Board evaluation which is based on an all-embracing concept of 'best practice' will be likely to deliver outcomes that enable the Board to become highly effective – indeed, exceptional – in mirroring those same facets of 'best practice'.

One solution to this challenge is to extend the framework shown in figures 3 to 6 to provide the basis of an evaluation instrument to measure Board effectiveness. To take the example of 'Ethos: Mission' that was outlined in figure 4, each descriptor could be adapted as an evaluative statement to measure the satisfaction of Trustees and Board stakeholders, as shown in figure 7.

If this process were extended to embrace all 20 of the sub-dimensions shown in figure 3, a Board would have at its disposal a comprehensive evaluation tool that would provide

| | For each of these statements, how satisfied are you that: | Very Dissatisfied | Dissatisfied | Satisfied | Very Satisfied | Don't know / NA |
|-----------------------------------|--|-------------------|--------------|-----------|----------------|-----------------|
| MISSION (ENDURING PURPOSE) | The board develops, articulates and upholds the mission | | | | | |
| | All trustees understand and support the current mission statement | | | | | |
| | The board effectively measures the school's success in implementing its mission, and it promotes corrective action if deficiencies are evident | | | | | |
| | All trustees are familiar with the current mission statement | | | | | |
| | The board holds the school, through its Head, responsible for achieving its mission | | | | | |
| | All trustees have participated in discussions to review and deepen their understanding of the school's mission | | | | | |
| | The board has a formal process (such as regular retreats) to foster active board participation in examining mission-related issues | | | | | |
| | The board's decisions support and advance the mission | | | | | |
| | The current mission statement is appropriate for the school's role in the next few years | | | | | |
| | Trustees can clearly articulate the school's mission | | | | | |

Figure 7 – Extract from a Board effectiveness evaluation survey (Ethos: Mission shown as an example).

both a quantifiable measure of performance (especially if used repeatedly over time) and a learning tool to obtain a comprehensive view of the extent to which the school was achieving its mission and goals.

CONCLUSION

Trustees of School Boards are not forced to serve; they choose to do so, and usually for entirely altruistic motives. Their work on School Boards is something akin to an unpaid hobby, albeit one that can be very time-consuming and often stressful.

Unlike many voluntary activities, the consequences of serving on a School Board are so significant that extensive accountability is rightly demanded. The high level of responsibility that Trustees possess strongly implies that a methodical, rigorous process of training and evaluation is indispensable to effective governance. As Carver notes, "evaluation is an integral part of the management process, and it must be integral to governance as well" (2006, p. 105).

It has been demonstrated (Goodman *et.al.*, 1997) that School Boards which practice high quality governance, including engaging in regular training, goal setting and evaluation, tend to have higher levels of student achievement as measured by lower dropout rates, the percentage of students going to university, and aptitude test scores. Furthermore, schools with effectively functioning governance structures are more stable, they have happier Trustees, and most importantly, they are more effective in achieving governance outcomes. A key recommendation of Goodman *et.al.* was that Boards should engage in regular, ongoing team-building education and development (that should also include the Head) in order "to achieve high quality, collaborative governance that effectively improves students' educational attainment" (Goodman *et.al.*, 1997, cited in Land, 2002, p. 20).

If we accept the underlying assumption of this paper (that School Boards wish to be as effective as possible), then for the sake of their schools and the students in them, Boards have a duty to go beyond being 'responsible Boards' to becoming 'exceptional Boards'. To purloin Margaret Thatcher's famous 'TINA' statement when asserting the inevitability of globalisation: "There Is No Alternative".

"School Boards which practice high quality governance tend to have higher levels of student achievement."

"Schools with effectively functioning governance structures are more stable, they have happier Trustees, and they are more effective in achieving governance outcomes."

"Boards require a complete and comprehensive set of evaluation criteria that encapsulates 'best practice'."

"Responsible and effective Boards should engage in regular, ongoing training and evaluation."

APPENDIX 1 - SELF-DIAGNOSIS OF SUB-OPTIMAL BOARD PERFORMANCE

Consider carrying out a self-diagnosis of your Board effectiveness by using the checklists below to identify some of the reasons why your Board may be operating sub-optimally.

PROBLEM TRUSTEES

- **Corporate Trustees** – who have experience as members of corporate Boards (or Boards outside the education sector) and over-estimate the value and relevance of this experience in the context of a School Board.
- **Amateur Trustees** – who have limited understanding of best practice in School Boards, perhaps because they were invited to be Trustees as a consequence of personal relationships with other Trustees.
- **Parent Trustees** – whose primary interests are on the welfare of their own child or friends' children (and even worse, may threaten to withdraw their child from the school if they can't get their way).
- **Single Agenda Trustees** – who agreed to become Trustees in order to achieve a single goal or purpose.
- **Micromanaging Trustees** – who can't resist the urge to become involved in the operational side of the school (outside the scope of governance).
- **Absent Trustees** – who seldom attend meetings (but may be very generous or personally charming), and therefore add little value to the decision making process of Board meetings.
- **Disengaged Trustees** – who lack (or have lost) the energy, emotional engagement or time required to make worthwhile contributions.
- **Overzealous Trustees** – who energetically seek information without Board authority, or purport to act or speak for the entire Board without having the authority to do so.
- **Compromised Trustees** – whose neutrality has been compromised by receiving gifts, trips, positions, meals or other inducements to vote or behave in a certain manner.
- **Tenured Trustees** – who feel they have few or no boundaries constraining their behaviour because their position on the Board is so secure.
- **Representative Trustees** – whose loyalty to a nominating body or group (such as faculty, alumni, or a sponsoring organisation) overrides their loyalty to the School Board, and may lead them to leak information inappropriately.
- **Lone wolf Trustees** – who do not fully share the decisions, values or vision of the school and therefore undermine the Board's unity and credibility by speaking indiscreetly or acting in ways that undermine the Board's position.
- **Employed Trustees** – who compromise the Board-Head lines of accountability/responsibility and communication by virtue of the fact that they are full Board Members (this conflict of roles most often affects the Bursar, but it might also be the Deputy Head, the Director of Development, or others who have been placed in this difficult position).

PROBLEMATIC BOARD DYNAMICS

- **Factional Board** – functions within cliques or groups rather than collegially with a unified sense of purpose.
- **Relational Board** – can take two forms, these being either (a) when it is dominated by the undue personality or influence of the Chair, or (b) when the workings are affected negatively by either a too-close or a too-distant relationship between the Chair and the Head.
- **Compromised Board** – feels unduly indebted to a significant donor and allows its good judgment and due processes to be compromised accordingly; this can be exacerbated when the significant donor is a Trustee (or even the Board Chair!).
- **Anachronistic Board** – continues to function under a structure that has long since ceased to be appropriate for the school's situation, growth or current demographics.
- **Elected Board** – Trustees' behaviour and decisions are driven by an annual or biennial cycle of elections, the campaigns for which can be divisive and polarising.
- **Crowd-pleasing Board** – strategic focus and attention to governance can become diluted by the desire to make as many people happy as often as possible.
- **Amnesiac Board** – has had such a rapid turnover of Trustees that collective memory has become compromised.
- **Narrowly-Focussed Board** – has become unduly focussed on one or a few significant issues (such as the search for a new Head or the development of a new strategic plan) that balance has been sacrificed in the wider duty of governance.
- **Operational Board** – intrudes into the management role and day-to-day operations of the Head and the Senior Administrators.
- **Tactical Board** – focusses unduly on operational matters at the expense of developing strategic direction, mission and vision.
- **Reactive Board** – loses focus on the wider role of governance because it feels the need to respond to pressure (often very emotional) from one or a few Trustees to a particular issue, such as sport, art, examination results, a specific safety issue or an immediate crisis (such as the expulsion of a Trustee's child).
- **Change-Obsessed Board** – confuses change with worthwhile achievement.
- **Monocultural Board** – misses out on the demonstrated benefits of diversity (of gender, ethnicity, age, skills, etc) in Board composition as a means to increase creativity and effective decision making (Page, 2007, especially chapters 1, 6 & 13; Page, 2010; Surowiecki, 2005).
- **Complacent Board** – Trustees may be unaware that their Board falls short of 'best practice'; this usually implies that the Board has no effective mechanism of Board training or evaluation. A less common variation on the complacent Board arises when Trustees recognise the shortcomings but they are unwilling to engage in the effort required to help address these shortcomings.

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