



Board Self-Evaluation: Monitoring your board's policies

By Michael Healy

Boards that want to provide the best leadership possible will regularly evaluate their own performance to highlight successes and areas needing improvement. Using your board's stated policy agreements as the basis of your assessment offers one straightforward approach to self-evaluation. As much as anything else, this approach acts as a reminder that the board's work is guided by your agreements. Here are some tips for structuring your self-evaluation:

- ◆ Use a process that's well designed for the task at hand.
 - Aim for something that feels honest, encourages appreciation for what's working, and leads to continuous improvement.
 - Treat this self-evaluation work differently than you do the monitoring of Ends and Limitations policies. In monitoring policies that direct the GM/ED, the board is getting accountability information about things that the board generally does not see and is not involved with. In monitoring the Board Process and Board-Management Relationship policies, the board is reviewing its own activities and decisions.
 - Include the GM/ED's perspective, especially when monitoring the Board-Management Relationship policies.
 - Though it's important, this part of the board's work does not need to be overly formal or structured; more structure or formality does not necessarily lead to better outcomes. Most of this self-evaluation can be qualitative or subjective in nature. Typically, you don't need a lot of "measurables." You might have a few exceptions – for example if you have specific attendance requirements.
 - Devote enough time to self-evaluation so that it actually helps your board do your best work. Take care not to put so much time into evaluation that it takes time away from other important work.
 - If you find that your self-evaluation work has become stale or ineffective, you might consider using a different process for a while.

- ◆ Keep the board self-evaluation process simple. The following two methods have proven useful for a number of boards. You might consider using one of these just as described, or either can be modified to better fit your needs and goals.
 - Have a focused conversation about the policy, asking directors to respond to questions like the suggestions below. Look for specific examples, rather than vague yes/no answers. If you find that your conversations are becoming rote, consider changing the way you ask the questions to encourage more thoughtful responses.
 - Some good guiding questions include: Have we done what we said we would do? What are we doing well? How can we improve? Is this still the policy we want?
 - Consider a rotating responsibility, having one director prepare answers to the questions in advance of the meeting. That director's perspective can provide the starting point for discussion.
 - Before the meeting, all directors should prepare by reviewing the policy (or policies).

- Use an on-line survey tool to create a 1-5 rating system for each policy.
 - Have each director rate how the board is doing for each policy and sub-policy.
 - Compile the results and review them together at the meeting. Pay particular attention to high and low average ratings, or ratings with a standard deviation > 1. Take a few minutes to talk about what the results mean, and what you want to do with your insights.
- ◆ Whichever method you use, you can make the process more meaningful and useful by:
 - Celebrating and appreciating good performance. If an individual person or sub-set of the board was responsible for the success, thank them.
 - Addressing items that need more attention, either because you want to do a better job meeting your expectations or because the policy itself needs updating. You might decide to add this to a future meeting agenda. You could ask the responsible person to fix the situation and report back to the board at a set time. For substantial issues, you may want to make this part of your work plan for the year ahead, devoting concerted attention to the topic.
- ◆ Choose a frequency that makes sense for your board. You can review your policies all at once annually, or you can spread this out throughout the year by addressing 1-2 policies monthly, or a larger subset quarterly.

Using your stated policy agreements as described here can be a completely sufficient and effective self-evaluation process. Still, some boards may find value in occasionally adding another layer of review. If you decide that you want more, some other approaches to consider include:

- The [4 Pillars of Cooperative Governance Self-Assessment Tool](#). This survey offers a holistic overview of the board's role and may elicit insights about work that your current policies don't cover.
- Peer evaluations of individual directors. You could use your Code of Conduct policy and other policies as the basis of your evaluation.
- Evaluating each board meeting. You might use various policies as guiding questions as a way to encourage participants to be thoughtful about what makes a meeting excellent.

Other resources:

[Making Ourselves Accountable: Board self-evaluation fosters reflection, constant improvement](#)

[Video Field Guide: Board Self-Evaluation](#)

[CBLD Policy Template](#)