Building a Positive Board Performance Culture, Part II

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Building a positive board performance culture takes continuous work and vigilance on the part of the board. Part I explored the vital concepts of Shared Understanding of the Job of the Board & Shared Expectations for Board Performance, but every year boards have an election and end up with a 'new' board. This provides the board with the opportunity to take advantage of a well known team development model: **Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing and Transforming** (originally introduced by Bruce Tuckman back in 1965 with our addition of Transforming to fit the board election cycle). While there is a logical progression through the 5 stages, teams do not always flow from one stage to the next in a linear manner. Understanding this general model of development can help boards address the needs of the individuals and the group to help minimize the negatives and take advantage of opportunities to move toward a positive board performance culture.

We will use the "What? So What? Now What?" reflection and analysis model to help articulate the definition (What?), why this matters (So What?), and what we can do to leverage this knowledge (Now What?). Note: When we refer to "leader behaviors" below, we are not only referring to the board chair; a mature board is a group of leaders who all share responsibility for board effectiveness.

Forming

What? This is the stage when the team comes together but has not yet begun to tackle their work. This is often characterized by people being on their best behavior with lots of silent questioning of how this will all work out.

Members have a variety of questions such as:

- Who are these people?
- What is expected of me?
- How do I fit in?
- Who will lead?
- What are our goals and why?

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So what? This is an opportunity to start the process of building unity around shared purpose, approaches to work and respectful working relationships and prepare the team for the inevitable disagreements and conflicts ahead.

Now what? Effective leader behaviors can include:

- making introductions
- answering questions
- establishing trust
- modeling expected behaviors
- clarifying and building agreement around goals, procedures, rules and expectations
- Specific tools and approaches include:
- have an orientation or training for new (or potential) members
- distribute a packet of all pertinent documents, policies, & process to new and returning members
- use a check-in to start meetings
- do a get-to-know-you activity like Two Truths And A Lie or just have everyone share their answer to question(s) like "when did you join the co-op & why?" or "what's your favorite product & why?"

Storming

What? Storming typically kicks in when it is time to start to do work together as a group and decisions must be made regarding what is important and how to proceed. These decisions will uncover disagreement on goals and means. It is also when diverse personalities start to become apparent. This may be characterized by polarization, coalitions or cliques, internal competition, disagreement with the leader, challenging others' points of view, violating team norms.

Team members' questions include:

- Can I work with these people?
- Does this group have any chance of actually working together?
- Can we get past all these disagreements and personality conflicts?
- Can we possibly ever communicate negative information or make decisions amidst this disagreement?
- Is this the right leader?
- Do I even want to be in this group?
- What was I thinking?

So what? This is an opportunity to identify where disagreement lies, to identify learning needed and to show the team can disagree without falling apart. A board that successfully addresses the issues that arise in this

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stage can progress into Norming and Performing; leaving the serious questions unresolved can lead to longer-term difficulties or severe dysfunction.

Now what? Effective leader behaviors include:

- building shared agreement on common values and goals
- generating commitment among team members
- effective mediation
- providing individual and team recognition
- foster win/win thinking
- focus the team on the issues rather than the people

The aim is to push toward building shared agreement on group norms and the desire for a positive performance culture (rather than one of dysfunction). Specific tools and approaches include:

- reinforce that divergent thinking is a normal, if frustrating, phase
- identify incremental steps (even if it's just identifying the problem) and acknowledge their completion
- use an outside facilitator or mediator, if necessary
- Make efforts to focus on the shared work problems/challenges rather than the people

Norming

What? This stage arises as the group successfully navigates through the storming stage and agrees to build group norms in order to get to positive performance. This is characterized by the team stepping back and regrouping.

Member questions may include:

- What are the revised set of goals and processes we want to use to be effective?
- How do we gain further clarity on roles and responsibilities?
- How do we respectfully work together with diverse personalities and points of view?
- How do we take advantage of the diversity on our team?
- How can we monitor our own behavior so we follow our own rules?
- How can we set up our leadership and team for success?

So what? This is an opportunity to build shared agreement on direction, process and productive working relationships.

Now what? Effective leader behaviors include:

recognizing the need for stepping back and having a facilitated conversation to build shared agreement on the direction, processes and interpersonal norms of the team.

Specific approaches include:

- inviting team members to share the leadership; empower individuals to take point on certain processes, including facilitation of that process
- regular self-assessment of board agreements/policies covering director code of conduct, board delegation, and other board process
- quantifiable self-evaluation and feedback through survey tools

Performing

What? At this stage the team has a shared agreement on direction, process and acceptable ways to deal with one another in respectful and productive way.

Team member questions may now be:

- How can we continuously improve?
- How can we continue to solidify our foundations?
- How can we foster innovation and creativity?
- How can we maintain a high level of energy and commitment to the team?
- How can we perpetuate our culture of excellence?
- Do we have systems to ensure institutional memory?
- How can we improve as a leadership team for the co-op?

So what? This is an opportunity to positively impact the organization and its stakeholders through effective governance and leadership.

Now what? Effective leader behaviors may include:

- fostering innovation and continuous improvement simultaneously
- nurturing the culture of the team
- encouraging regular team reflection and feedback on board performance
- supporting board members
- keeping a watchful eye out for regression or shift to other stages

Specific approaches include:

- celebrating team achievements
- mentoring and planning for leadership succession

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Transforming

What? This is an annual time for a board when members cycle off at election time or at least the term comes to an end.

Team member questions may now be:

- How can we continuously improve?
- How can we continue to solidify our foundations?
- How can we foster innovation and creativity?
- How can we maintain a high level of energy and commitment to the team?
- How can we improve as a leadership team for the co-op?
- Did my time on the board matter?
- Did we get anything accomplished over this last year?
- Was it worth it?

So what? This is an opportunity to reflect, learn, honor and celebrate.

Now what? Effective leader behaviors include:

- helping the board reflect on the last year
- identifying and recognizing individual and team accomplishments
- celebrating success
- honoring those that have served

Specific approaches include:

- asking what went well
- asking what might we do differently to have made it even better?
- create a ceremony or process that allows closure for those leaving

Questions for discussion:

1. At which stage is our board? (Note: this can change quickly and in a non-linear manner.)
2. In what stage do I feel most comfortable? Least comfortable?
3. What stage provides the biggest opportunity for us to grow/improve?
4. How can we take advantage of the forming stage to minimize negative fallout from the inevitable disagreements and personality tensions that will come as we engage with our work?
5. If our board is deeply storming, what can we do to move toward creating norms for performance?
6. How can we effectively move our board toward positive performance? Why is this important?
7. How can we take advantage of the transformation stage to improve future board performance?

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Related CBLD Resources:

- [Building a Positive Board Performance Culture Part I](#)

Sources:

Much of the conceptual material above was based on the work of David Whetton and Kim Cameron in their 1995 book Developing Management Skills, 3rd Ed. HarperCollins Publishers, New York.

The "Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing" team development model was introduced by Bruce Tuckman in 1965 and revised in 1977 to include "Adjourning". We have chosen to use the term "Transforming" as the fifth stage because we feel it more accurately reflects the ongoing life-cycle of our boards.

Sam Kaner's book "Participatory Decision Making" has many great resources for team development, including tools for understanding convergent and divergent thinking.

Get-to-know-you activities such as "Two Truths and A Lie" can be found easily online.