

Attributes of Exceptional Boards

Leading public organizations and governing with colleagues on a board is a challenging art of community service. The Institute recognizes that many aspects of leadership and governance are not intuitive. This piece is intended to provide board members and administrators/executives insight into the attributes of exceptional boards as well as provide practical tips to help them become exceptional.

1. Exceptional boards develop a sense of team – a partnership with the chief administrator to govern and manage the county

The members of the board and chief administrator/executive see themselves and work as a team as they undertake a series of tasks to further their common purpose. The individual team members work in a coordinated and collaborative manner with a high degree of respect, trust and openness. The team values diversity in style and perspective. The team thinks and acts strategically as it examines issues/situations and decides on a course of action serving their county's mission and goals.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- Successfully transition from candidate to a member of the board.
- Become a champion of the county. Make decisions based on the needs and interests of the community at-large / the greater good.
- Develop, communicate and support policy goals and board decisions.
- Demonstrate a willingness to work collaboratively (as a team) and have a countywide perspective.

BEST PRACTICE TIPS

Build capacity to create a more effective team. The governance team (board members and chief administrator/executive) should get to know each other; how each person approaches issues, decision making style and so on. This can be accomplished at annual meetings or workshops throughout the year. In the event that board members disagree, clear ground rules (norms of behavior and practice) can help quell acrimony before it becomes a problem. It's important to remember that trust is built around understanding and respect, not necessarily agreement.

2. Exceptional boards have clear roles and responsibilities that are understood and adhered.

Exceptional boards understand their role is to serve as policy maker - to represent the values, beliefs and priorities of their community while serving in the community's best interest. They carry out a variety of responsibilities including: developing and adopting a vision for the county; focusing and aligning plans, policies, agreements and budgets in furtherance of this vision; and holding themselves and the chief administrator/executive accountable for results.

Exceptional boards understand that the chief administrator/executive is responsible for the day-to-day operations of the county. The chief administrator/executive is responsible for undertaking and accomplishing the policy objectives of the board. Exceptional boards recognize the subject matter expertise of staff and utilize their knowledge and experience to guide and inform decision making.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- Understand the role of local government and their responsibilities.
- Know their role - to set vision and policy, avoid micromanagement.
- Board members should strive to be informed about the issues facing the county and be prepared to ask questions of staff and each other.

BEST PRACTICE TIPS

Create a shared understanding of the chief administrator/executive's role and the board's expectations to optimize the working relationships. This shared understanding is informed by local charter and ordinance provisions that provide the overall framework for the relationship. The board should make time to have conversations during retreats and or study sessions to define and/or reveal and refine their role and responsibilities. Since role clarity between the board and chief administrator/executive is critical to mutual success, having clear protocols helps avoid misunderstandings.

3. Exceptional boards honor the relationship with staff and each other

Exceptional boards understand that a good working relationship with staff is vital to successful operation of the county. Exceptional boards treat each other and staff with dignity and respect. They act with civility and a high level of professional decorum. Board members build trust by not playing the “gotcha game” and strive to have a no secrets, no surprises approach as an operating norm. Finally, they respect the diversity of styles and perspectives among their colleagues and staff and are open to new ideas.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- Board members have the ability to respectfully disagree (to disagree without being disagreeable). They are able to leave it at the dais; debates are about policy, not personality.
- Exceptional board members reflect positive decorum/model of leadership by providing respectful tone with colleagues.
- Establish a set of behaviors ahead of time, potentially documented in a code of conduct, to help promote civility and respect.

BEST PRACTICE TIPS

Set board priorities and strategic goals at an annual meeting; these goals and priorities are a tool to guide the chief administrator/executive and staff on where to focus their efforts. This annual meeting provides time for the board to reflect on community priorities as well as offer an opportunity to discuss their decorum and their relationship among each other and the relationship between the chief administrator/executive, staff and the board.

4. Exceptional boards routinely conduct effective meetings

Open and public meetings are central to democratic decision-making. Exceptional boards master the art of effective meetings. They develop and adhere to meeting protocols and processes. They spend time planning and organizing the agenda with the aim of having a more focused meeting. They allocate the board’s time and energy appropriately (focused on the board’s role and responsibilities) and meeting short- and long-term priorities. They honor the public’s participation and engagement and they generally start on time and are held during reasonable hours.

Exceptional boards use public meetings not only for their intended purpose, information sharing and decision-making, but they also use the meeting to demonstrate respect and

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- Board members are respectful of each other, the public and everyone’s time.
- Board members use engaging body language as a way to demonstrate respect.
- Issues are not personalized, thoughtful dialogue is the objective.
- Agenda packets are read, board members come prepared and have an open mind.
- Respect is demonstrated for varied opinions.
- Everyone strives to be civil and act with decorum.

civility for each other, staff and the public. Exceptional board members prepare in advance of the meeting, remain focused on the county goals and objectives and mindful of their role and responsibilities.

BEST PRACTICE TIPS

Develop and adopt (with regular reviews and updates), guidelines for conducting meetings and making decisions. These governance protocols typically address meeting procedures (agenda preparation, how to put issues on the agenda, debate and voting procedures (parliamentary rules) and standards of decorum (civility). As part of a regular self-assessment, boards should evaluate their meetings and their effectiveness and adjust behavior and practices for better results.

5. Exceptional boards hold themselves and the county accountable

Exceptional boards operate openly, ethically and work to engage the community in a myriad of decisions impacting the prosperity and well-being of their community. Toward that end, exceptional boards consistently provide short- and long-term strategic direction and goals, as well as provide budget, program and policy oversight.

Exceptional boards hold themselves accountable for the conduct, behavior and effectiveness of the governing body. They establish clear priorities and goals and hold the chief administrator/executive accountable for results. Finally, they embrace accountability as a process and tool to calibrate ongoing efforts to address and meet policy and program objectives.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- Board members operate ethically and with integrity.
- Boards conduct team building / goal setting exercise to track progress towards mutually agreed upon goals.
- Boards take responsibility for the results (good and bad).
- Boards celebrate success.
- Board members hold themselves responsible for adhering to operating protocols and codes of conduct.

BEST PRACTICE TIPS

Annually evaluate board and chief administrator/executive performance toward achieving the county's priorities and goals (consider having this be part of an annual goal setting meeting). Boards should consider assessing its own behavior and effectiveness as part of its annual self-assessment.

6. Exceptional boards have members who practice continuous personal learning and development

Governance is not intuitive. In addition, the policy and economic environment impacting counties is ever changing. Exceptional boards continually provide the opportunity to build their knowledge and skills, enhance their understanding of key issues, increase their awareness of best practices and sharpen their leadership and governance skills.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- Stay informed on key issues.
- Gain key insights and knowledge on all aspects of governing, from budgets to plans and everything in between.
- Learning to listen is sometimes more important than learning to give a speech.

BEST PRACTICE TIPS

Seek out national, state and local professional growth and educational opportunities. These opportunities can focus on the nuts and bolts of governing to help you gain valuable information and/or insights on key policy issues facing your county. In addition, county run orientations for newly elected officials provide a good way to acclimate new members to the board's norms and protocols as well as the budget and key policy issues.

About the Institute for Local Government

The Institute for Local Government (ILG) is the nonprofit 501(c)3 research and education affiliate of the League of California Cities, the California State Association of Counties and the California Special Districts Association. Our mission is to promote good government at the local level with practical, impartial and easy-to-use resources for California communities.

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