



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION
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Board Health, Board Culture

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Board Health Questions

To what extent is the board mature and optimally functioning? Towards which side of the dividing line is your board on the following continua? On which items do you wish your board were more towards the second column?

Immature or Young Boards

vs. Mature and Optimally Functioning Boards

1. Trustees assume quasi-administrative roles.	Respective roles clear: board sets policy & administration implements it.
2. Recruitment to board is haphazard.	Recruitment based upon expertise, resources and skills.
3. Board time wasted with revisiting of issues	Efficient structure & calendar
4. Political infighting, absorption with the immediate "crisis"	Focus on the long-term & the strategic
5. Basic board experience: exhaustion & burn-out	Mood of excitement and fulfillment: being part of a successful enterprise

Points To Ponder

To the extent that a board is more to the right side than the left of these continua, what needs to change in order for the board to become more "mature"? Different composition to the board? Different structure to meetings? Clearer definition of roles and boundaries? More professional development training for the board?

Board Culture Questions

What are the key and underlying beliefs about the board and how it operates? What disparity is there between those assumptions as public & overt (board as array of experts, each carrying equal weight) vs. private and covert (board comprised of subgroups, including a small, cohesive core of insiders): Score 1 or 2 on the following questions:

1. Is the board environment open and encouraging to new thinking (1)? Or does the board rely on conventional thinking, tried & true measures that have always worked in the past (2)?
2. Are new board members initiated into the board culture by being expected to speak up and contribute immediately (1)? Or are they expected to sit back at first to get a read of the lay of the land (2)?
3. Are open challenges to the board leadership acceptable (1)? Or unacceptable (2)?
4. Is there the feeling of equality among members of the board (1)? Or that some board members are "more equal" than others (i.e., carry more weight) (2)?
5. Is there the practice that all issues are for general board deliberation (i.e., evaluation and compensation of the head) (1)? Or that some issues require more private attention (2)?
6. Is there the assumption that personal feelings should be expressed (1)? Or suppressed (2)?
7. Does the board see itself as a group, with its own agenda as a team, with its responsibilities as a group to respond to crises and to assume some ownership for them (1)? Or does the board define reality in terms of individuals each of whom brings powerful (and sometimes competing) judgment and expertise to the table (2)?
8. Does the board take time to be reflective, to debrief difficult decisions or the management of a crisis, to look for ways to learn from past mistakes and to plan corporately for the future (1)? Or does the board see responsibilities as vested in individuals (board

chair, head, finance committee chair, business manger, admissions director, etc.) (2)?

9. Is the board open to bringing in outside facilitators to observe the decision-making process and to offer advice on possible blind spots (1): Or is the board more comfortable relying upon its own resources (2)?

10. Does the board value diversity within its own group (1)? Or consensus (2)?

Debriefing:

Scores 10-15: Modern board—open, vigorous, more democratic, more responsible in productive ways to new challenges and crises. Failures seen as opportunities to learn. Downside—like democracy, often some tensions and messiness.

Scores 15-20: Traditional board: closed, hierarchical, but powerfully focused and effective, especially in striking quickly when needed and in raising resources. Downside—failures seen as the weakness of individuals, so heads roll.

Points To Ponder

As a leadership and team-building exercise, ask all board members to indicate and tally their scores on this inventory, then have a show of hands: How many scores 10-14? How many scored 15? How many scored 16-20? The show of hands will indicate how diverse the opinion is about the culture of the board and whether or not newcomers view the board through different lenses than veterans.

Given what the votes show, is there any sense that the board could or should move in one direction or the other? If so, why? If not, why not?

What would be the preferred cultural profile for this board at this juncture in the school's history? What could the board do to move in the direction of a preferred culture and modus operandi?

Board Training

To address the issues and questions raised by these exercises, NAIS recommends annual board development work: Contact NAIS (info@nais.org) for information on a Governance through Partnership workshop for one's board.

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