

Pastors' Edge

Creating a Healthy Church Board

Glen Elliott - April 6, 2017

A. A Healthy Unified Board is Vital for a Healthy Church

In this presentation, I'll use the word board to describe the group that has ultimate authority and responsibility for a local church including the hiring and firing of the senior leader. A board might also be called by any number of names including but not limited to a council, directors, elders or some other name.

Do you look forward to board meetings? Do you feel that the board provides good direction while protecting you? Are your board meetings helpful and productive? Is trust clearly present and evident?

Boards are important. They matter. Boards are central to whether a church is or becomes healthy and fulfilling its God designed purpose. The health and progress of the church depends on a board that is unified, healthy and leads in a way that moves the church forward rather than backward. Almost every church that has plateaued or is declining (80% of all churches) has a disunified and/or unhealthy board that is leading in a way that is hurting the pastor and the church. Healthy board governance is a critical factor in advancing the kingdom of God. Without a unified and healthy church board, it is almost impossible to see healthy growth spiritually and numerically. The kind of governance that is functioning is a key to whether a church will be effective in its mission to make disciples and make a difference for the Kingdom of God. Poor governance will hinder all that. It can't be overlooked. A healthy board equals a healthy church and a healthy pastor.

The story of my pain (I'll share it rather than put it in print).

What is it you don't want in a church board? What do you hate about your church board? Common responses include: mistrust, micromanaging, wasted time over minutia and details, fighting, disunity, internal conflict, continual disagreements, fear or other roadblocks to progress, personal and/or petty agendas, etc.

Here's the deal. You (the pastor) either lead or you don't! You have to lead in creating a healthy unified board. This doesn't magically happen. Rather, the pastor must help create such a board. In doing so, you might get fired (as you upset current or previous

board members or people holding power). But it is better to get fired for trying to do what is right and best for the church than stay hired, be miserable and be responsible for a sick and dying church. It takes courage, boldness and wisdom to insure you have a great board. It's worth the risk and effort.

We have many challenges when it comes to creating a great governance system: tradition, history and limitations based on the denomination or by-laws, persons of power and influence, ignorance to better models ("we've always done it this way"), etc.

Two keys to create a unified and healthy board. You can't ignore either of these two: the right people and the right system or structure.

B. The Right People

1. Select the "right" people.

- Define your "who." What qualifications are non-negotiable for a healthy board member to have?
- Spiritually mature followers of Jesus (see 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9)
- Leaders who are humble and bold who do not see themselves as elected representatives
- Sold out to the unique vision and mission of your church and invested (attending, serving, giving, etc.) in your church
- Healthy people relationally who also are more wired for strategic focus than managing details and protecting the past
- A system that ensures you select the right people

2. Grow and deepen the relationships among the board members

- Relational time and prayer with and for each other in every board meeting
- Annual retreat(s)
- Annual board self-evaluation

C. The Right System - Policy Governance

1. Critical principles to build a great governance system on:

- Built on trust to foster trust
- The board is unified and speaks with only one voice
- The board leads and makes decisions through policies developed in advance which gives permission and freedom to the pastor to lead within predefined limits.

The football game illustration. The pastor is the coach. He is to move the team (the church) down the field toward the goal line. He trains and prepares the team the best he knows how. He makes the strategy based on the opponent's strengths and weaknesses. He calls the plays and chooses which players to use. He provides the resources for the team to succeed within the approved limits. He must play by the agreed rules of the game and stay within the boundaries of the field. The owner (the board) sits in the stands and doesn't interfere unless the team is forever moving the wrong way (never scores), or he violates the rules of the game, or goes outside the boundaries of the field, or does anything illegal or immoral.

2. Policy governance document (policies in writing)

The governance document of a local church is a living document that informs the board and the staff leader (Senior or Lead Pastor) as to healthy and appropriate formation of the community. The board leads specifically through the Lead Pastor who is the board's one employee and who is accountable to the board. Further, the governance document lays out responsibilities for both the board and the Lead Pastor as together—with the larger staff and the entire church community—they seek to be faithful to the church's ever-emerging mission.

The board "owns" (as trustees) the church and governs on behalf of the congregation who are the members or partners who have a vital interest but who are not seated at the table. However, the board should never view itself as a body that is elected to be a formal representative of the membership. They just govern on behalf of the church.

Through the governance document, the board is choosing to define direction and delegate authority in advance to the Lead Pastor rather than approve staff plans on an ongoing basis. This will help keep the board from becoming immersed in details, trivia and ineffective and inefficient leadership. The board is proactive by setting policies and then the board judges the plans, programs and strategies the Lead Pastor uses to ensure they align with the policies. The board avoids approving plans, programs, staffing or budgets. The board defines the criteria that the Lead Pastor operates by in all these areas. The Lead Pastor willingly communicates ideas, issues and plans clearly for information, but without asking for approval for every plan, program or expenditure unless the policy requires approval.

The board will lead primarily through established written policies. The four areas of written policy contained in the governance document are:

1. Vision, Ends and Mission: Vision reveals what the church community will look like as she more faithfully answers her mission and purpose. Ends define and shape her vision. They are the major pathways or critical steps that help the church reach or accomplish our vision over time. Mission describes what the

people of the church do. The board is responsible for ensuring that the Vision, Ends and Mission are in sync with the will of God for the local church and that the staff is leading the church towards them. Means are the programs, personnel and resources that the Lead Pastor and staff use within the defined limitations to fulfill the Vision through the Ends and Mission and therefore are not a primary concern of the board.

II. Executive Limitations: These policies instruct the Lead Pastor as to the practices that cannot be used in the pursuit of the Vision and Ends. Any practices *not* listed as Executive Limitations are therefore within the purview of the Lead Pastor in pursuit of the Ends. Note that there are levels of limitations: from the broadest limitation policies to more specific limitation policies.

III. Board Self-Governance: These policies instruct the board as to how the board will govern itself and remain faithful to its mandate and purpose.

IV. Lead Pastor and Board Relationship Policies: These policies describe how the the board delegates authority and responsibility to the Lead Pastor. It also states how the board will monitor the Lead Pastor's faithfulness to the policies and direction set by the board.

This is an internal church document rather than a public document and is developed and amended exclusively by the board. This document allows the board to lead the church by policy or guidelines of big picture matters, delegate authority and responsibility to the Lead Pastor and monitor the delegated authority and responsibility.

D. Resources

Sticky Teams by Larry Osborne (Zondervan: 2010)

Elders and Leaders - God's Plan for Leading the Church by Gene A. Getz (Moody Press: 2003)

Focusing Your Church Board - Using the Carver Policy Governance Model by Ted Hull (Word Alive Press: 2015)

The Imperfect Board Member - Discovering the Seven Disciplines of Governance Excellence by Jim Brown (Jossey-Bass: 2006)

Church Polity - Understanding Elder Governance in the Local Church (A Template) - free pdf download at: http://e2elders.org/?page_id=14 by Gary Johnson (2007)

Pantano Christian Church Elder's Governance, Revision #11