

A respectful approach to director assessment

Can individual board member development be conducted without awkwardness, tension, and the potential for upsetting boardroom decorum? Yes. **BY PETER SPANBERGER**

BOARDS ARE HESITANT to venture into individual board member assessment and development. They are more inclined to use “safe” developmental activities, such as board schools, guest speakers, subscriptions to magazines, etc. While beneficial, these activities do not get to a personal or individual board member level of analysis, even though many board deficiencies are the direct result of individual behavior. This hesitancy is understandable, but may prevent a board from solving particular problems or reaching higher levels of performance. Dysfunctional or ineffective board member behavior can wind up being tolerated or ignored even when the costs of such behavior are high.

There are a number of reasons behind this hesitancy. Board members are typically quite accomplished in their professional achievements. They are correct in concluding how accomplished they are, but this often leads to the belief that further development is not needed. This inches into arrogance and is very much at odds with the development of the sophisticated and complicated behavioral requirements of board service. Opportunities to become better at being a board member can go unrealized when such attitudes are present.

Social awkwardness also causes hesitancy. Dysfunctional behavior is often tolerated because of the social awkwardness of describing or confronting it. Both the provider and receiver of feedback experience significant tension and are thus inclined to avoid the whole issue.

Even when a board conducts an assessment of individual board members, the resulting behavioral feedback often elicits defensiveness or denial. Because of these challenges boards conclude that the chances of altering the behavior are small and not worth the associated risks.

Another hesitancy has to do with the risks of

upsetting boardroom decorum when individual board member behaviors and attributes are discussed. The potential for upset certainly exists.

A fundamental question involves whether such individual board member development can be conducted without upsetting boardroom decorum.

‘I’m doing you a favor’

Individual board members sometimes have the attitude that they are doing the organization a favor by serving on the board. A typical response to suggestions about individual board member development involves resistance based on the assumption that when someone signed up for board service they didn’t sign up for self-analysis. Thus, self-reflection and development doesn’t occur, even when needed.

These legitimate hesitancies also fuel a lost opportunity. A board’s self-reflection and self-development is a prime opportunity to model the importance of self-improvement. When a board engages in developmental activities they precipitate and stimulate self-improvement thinking on the part of the executive group. Failure to engage in such self-development can contribute to a paucity of self-development thinking on the part of management.

Are there ways to overcome these legitimate sources of hesitancy? Is it possible to create a process for individual board member development while minimizing the associated risks?

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A process starting point

Psychologists sometimes “work in the derivative”: This involves talking with a client about feelings, behavior, relationships, etc., but the focus is on another individual or on an abstraction of an individual. This is quite effective in having the client feel safe and comfortable enough to examine sensitive materials in a detached and nonpersonal way. The individual thus learns without self-disclosure or potential embarrassment. “I have a friend who...” nicely captures the concept. Working in the derivative can be a way to engage in individual board member development while minimizing or eliminating the aforementioned risks.

The first step would be to present data about the most functional and dysfunctional attributes manifested by a board. These can come from research

on all boards or the attributes can come from data collected about the specific board. A standard board functioning questionnaire can be administered. More powerfully, interviews conducted by consulting psychologists about board behaviors can capture more subtle but important behaviors. Most powerfully of all, process observations of the board in action can provide psychologists with even more in-depth insights.

Whether the attributes came from research in general or data collection about the specific board depends on the readiness of that particular board. Either starting point can work.

The most effective and ineffective board attributes would be presented to the board followed by a discussion about specific behaviors that illustrate the presence or absence of these attributes. There would be no calibration of which individual board member manifests how much or how little of each attribute. There would be a generic discussion about these attributes and their underlying behaviors. This discussion would be academic and nonpersonal in nature but specific enough so that each board member could engage in private calibration and gain ideas about new and different behaviors. Self-reflection can prevent the defensiveness so often seen when feedback is given to an individual, and thus result in greater behavioral change.

What boards saw as ‘needing work’

One board that went through this process identified

rigorous analysis as a strength. The ensuing discussion identified the very specific behaviors that lead to top-notch analysis. Doing one’s homework, talking only when someone has something important to say, and soliciting input from those who hold opposing views were some of the behaviors driving rigorous analysis.

Another board identified lack of diplomacy as a weakness. The ensuing board discussion identified interrupting others, beginning with a conclusion, and manifesting subtle signs of exasperation when others spoke as some of the behaviors underlying lack of diplomacy.

Another board identified lack of flexibility as an attribute in need of work. This board would continue taking the safest possible steps, even at the cost of significant lost opportunity. They identified a failure to appreciate the huge changes that had occurred in their industry, a failure to consider ways of mitigating inevitable risks, and frequent interruption of suggestions about greater risk as some of the behaviors underlying the lack of flexibility attribute.

A deepened understanding

As a result of such discussions, board members can deepen their understanding of these attributes and the underlying behaviors. No calibration is necessary. All board members improved their skills around each of these attributes irrespective of their current levels of that attribute. The discussion thus raised all ships with no individual board member discomfort.

A follow up session with the board some six to 12 months later can be held. This additional session would provide an opportunity for the board to reflect on how it has improved or not. This would also be an opportunity for board members to talk about ways in which they have altered their behaviors for the good, an additional learning opportunity for the entire board.

A board, by “working in the derivative,” can accomplish individual board member development in ways that are respectful, comfortable, and impactful. When completed, significant individual board member development can be achieved, legitimate hesitations overcome, self improvement appropriately modeled, and the board in the aggregate will have improved its functioning. Thus, “working in the derivative” can be a powerful way to engineer respectful individual board member development. ■

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