



Board Member Excellence

Introduction

Michael Jordan, one of the best basketball players ever, was known for engaging in extra practice after each game. Tony Gwynn, one of the best hitters in the history of baseball, video-taped every at bat in order to analyze his batting so he could stay at the top of his game. A world renowned heart surgeon debriefed every surgery so that his next surgery would be even more effective. People who achieve excellence know what it looks like, engage in self analysis, benchmark themselves, practice behaviors, and fine tune their craft. In addition, they repeat this process

over an extended period of time. The joke, “How do I get to Carnegie Hall?”, with the answer being “practice, practice, practice”, captures the concept nicely.

Excellence in any endeavor, and especially in complex ones, requires continual self analysis and practice. Board service is as complex as professional sports, heart surgery or playing at Carnegie Hall. This same process of achieving excellence can be applied to board service. How might a board member go about doing this?

Steps Towards Excellence

The first step towards excellence is a desire to achieve it and a willingness to put in the required effort. Importantly, the board member has to have sufficient humility to recognize that despite significant professional accomplishments they likely have things to learn about excellence in the board room.

The next step is to analyze the specific behaviors that characterize being an excellent board member. This can come from readings, prior experiences with boards, observations of particularly effective board member behaviors, etc.

This type of analysis can indicate particularly effective behaviors, many of which are quite subtle. The ability to enrich the thinking of the entire board is often a critical requirement. The need to be incisive and get to the heart of an issue is another. The ability to do rigorous analyses is another requirement. Can a

board member respectfully deliver his or her thinking? The ability to stay on track as well as keeping others focused is essential. Knowing how to bring closure to an issue and end a discussion is often identified as a vital skill. The encouragement of input from reticent but excellent board members is a critical ability. Behaviors that advance the relationship between the board and management are also necessary. Such an inventory will identify generally required behaviors as well as those unique to the specific board.

The next step in the process involves the private benchmarking of one’s self against these behaviors. Individual board members can privately engage in an assessment about how much they manifest these various behaviors. Such benchmarking allows a board member to identify areas of strength as well as areas of weakness.

After these behaviors have been identified and benchmarked, individual board members can then reflect on their own behaviors after each board meeting. Just as Tony Gwynn watches videotapes of all of his at bats, a board member can reflect on their own behaviors at each board meeting. This can sharpen their understanding of what they did well, what they may have done poorly, and specific ways to improve their functioning.

The next step involves anticipating upcoming board meetings and going to the meetings with ideas about how to more fully manifest functional behaviors and minimize the manifestation of any dysfunctional behaviors.

This then becomes an exercise in continual self improvement. Over the course of meetings this process is repeated and becomes powerful in instilling new behaviors and having them become more automatic.

An additional step can involve always being observant of the behaviors being manifested in the board room. Different board

members will manifest different degrees and types of excellent behaviors. By watching models each board member can become more penetrating and astute about these specific and often subtle behaviors. This can be both insightful and skill enhancing.

These steps towards excellence can have a subtle but powerful effect on the entire board. A board member can serve as an influential model by more frequently manifesting effective behaviors and less frequently manifesting less effective behaviors. As more and more board members engage in such a process the functioning of the entire board will have been raised.

Opportunities for more generalized application of these behaviors also exist. The behaviors that are functional in the board room can also be applicable in terms of other leadership roles and even with family and friends. Broader practice of these behaviors can fine tune them as well as make them more automatic.

Conclusions

Board members can take personal responsibility for achieving excellence. The aforementioned process would allow this to happen in a private but powerful way as well as move both the individual and the entire board towards excellence. Ultimately

the individual board member and the entire board can achieve the type of excellence that Michael Jordan, Tony Gwynn, world renowned heart surgeons, and Carnegie Hall performers have achieved.

