

Guide to Board Self-Assessments

Here we answer the Who, What, How, and Why's of Board Self-Assessment.

Why Should Boards Engage In Self-Assessment?

- In order to identify where they are performing well as a board and where they might improve.
- Discussion about board roles and responsibilities can strengthen communication and understanding among board members. The discussions can lead to stronger, more cohesive working groups.
- A board's willingness to engage in self-assessment is a model for the rest of the institution. It indicates that board members take their responsibilities very seriously.
- Their interest in self-improvement sets a tone for others in the college to engage in an ongoing review of how education is delivered

What Should We Expect From a Self-Assessment?

Well-conducted board self-assessments lead to better boards. The results include:

- A summary of board accomplishments.
- A better understanding of what it means to be an effective board.
- Clarification of what trustees expect from each other and themselves.
- Improved communications among trustees and between the board and CEO.
- Identification of problems, potential issues, and areas to improve.
- An opportunity to discuss and solve problems that may hurt board performance.
- Identification of strategies to enhance board performance.
- Renewed dedication to the board.
- Agreement on board roles and trustee responsibilities.
- Board goals and objectives for the coming year.



Evaluating the performance of the board is not the same as evaluating individual trustee performance. The purpose of the evaluation is to look at the board as a whole, although a side benefit may be that individual board members gain appreciation for the roles and responsibilities of trusteeship.

How Should Boards Evaluate Themselves?

The process generally involves the use of self-assessment instruments. The results of the survey instruments then become the basis for discussion.

ACCT can assist by interviewing each board member, the CEO and others named by the board. The results of the interviews become the basis for discussion.

Who Should Be Involved In The Evaluation?

Each and every board member should participate in the self-evaluation by completing a board self-assessment instrument (if used), and by being involved in the discussion.

The CEO is also an important resource. Varying levels of involvement by the CEO are appropriate, from being a full participant in the process to contributing advice and support for the process, to providing comments on the board/CEO relationship. Most boards conduct the board and CEO evaluations in tandem, since the success of one entity depends on the effectiveness of the other.

In addition, boards may consider inviting comments from those who are part of the management team. Their perspectives can add valuable insight to the board process. However, evaluations that involve others need to be carefully designed so that the information is based on board-established criteria of effectiveness.

ACCT consultants and facilitators are often helpful to boards in developing and conducting an evaluation. They can provide an independent, non-biased influence to help keep board discussions focused and positive. ACCT's Board Leadership Services arranges for consultants to assist in the process.

Should the Board and CEO Evaluations be Linked?

The board and CEO work together in leading the institution: the board governs and the CEO leads and administers on a day-to-day basis. To evaluate the board without reference to the CEO's contributions is difficult and vice versa.



Whatever the process, boards should recognize that when evaluating the CEO, their support of the CEO is an important contribution to the success of the CEO. Conversely, when conducting self-assessments, the CEO's support and advice contributes to board success.

How Often Should Boards Evaluate Themselves?

Formal self-assessments should occur annually. Getting into the habit of regular evaluations makes the process part of the board and college culture, and lessens resistance to self-assessment.

New boards, or boards with a significant number of new members, may wish to hold sessions more often because the members are learning to work together as a team.

What Criteria Should We Use?

A basic self-assessment question is: "Are we doing what we said we would do?" If the purpose of the evaluation is to answer that question, the criteria used in the self-assessment process includes what the board has defined as its roles and the policies the board has for its own operations and behavior.

Another question is: "How does the board rank itself against commonly accepted standards of boardmanship?" In this case, the criteria used may be those established by national and state associations.

In either case, some possible categories are listed below.

- Board Organization
- Community Representation
- Policy Direction
- Board-CEO Relations
- College Operations
- Monitor Institutional Performance
- Board Behavior
- Advocacy
- Board Education



How Do We Design an Instrument?

The first step in designing an instrument is to identify what the board wants from the evaluation. If the major question is "Are we doing what we said we will do?" then whoever is designing the instrument needs to review board policies, practices and other statements that set out the board's expectations for itself.

For instance, if the board has a policy or practice that the board represents the community in its policy discussions, the evaluation instrument or checklist may include items that read:

1. The board has a comprehensive understanding of community educational needs.
2. The board considers the interests and needs of the community in its policy discussions.

On the other hand, if the major question is "How do we compare with state or national standards for governing boards?" then the instrument will be based on other standards, including the ACCT code of ethics and Standards for Effective Governance.

Sample Structures

Rating Scales

Trustees and others doing the evaluation will rate statements on an instrument according to how well they perceive the board performing. Every college has staff members who can assist with setting up rating scales. Following are a few examples of rating a statement in the board self-assessment process. Respondents would be asked to circle or write the letter of the response.

Agreement

Respondents rate how strongly they agree or disagree with a statement

Performance

Respondents rate the quality of a particular item (i.e. excellent, fair, poor, etc.)

Meets Standards

Respondents may be asked to simply state "yes" or "no" in response to a standard

Board Self-Assessment Instrument Item Bank

The Board Self-Assessment Instrument Item Bank is a composite of sample items that may be used in board self-assessment forms. Self-assessment instruments generally have 30-40 items.



Boards should select statements from the item bank that are most useful to them. Possible question topics include:

- Board Organization
- Policy Role
- Community Relations
- Policy Direction
- Board-CEO Relations
- College Operations
- Institutional Performance
- Board Leadership
- Advocating the College
- Board Education
- Open-ended Questions

How Should We Use The Results of a Board Self-Assessment?

The average ratings on a board self-assessment instrument, a summary of interviews, or key points from a group discussion identify the strengths of the board and areas for improvement.

The strengths should be celebrated and boards should congratulate themselves on their good work. The strengths are used to help the board improve.

Areas of improvement should be explored to identify the dynamics that contribute to any problems or weaknesses. Strategies to address the issues may include board retreats or workshops on a specific topic, study sessions or reading in an area where knowledge or clarification is needed.

Three to six board goals or activities for the coming year may be established based on the evaluation and performance on prior year goals. These goals become the basis for the board's long-range or annual agenda.