

CG/PG: Can Your Board Achieve Implementation Success?

A number of years ago, a senior administrator in one of our client districts commented to us: “Implementing this thing isn’t easy.”

He was right. A board’s willingness to pursue a Coherent Governance® or Policy Governance® project, its laborious work to develop sound policies, its serious attention to implementation coaching, and its formal adoption of the model do not in themselves assure successful implementation.

In our careers, we have seen far more successes than failures, but failure can—and unfortunately does—occur. What causes failure? And what are the ingredients necessary to assure successful implementation, and equally important, long-term sustainability?

We have given the issue serious thought during the past few years, and have tried to assess the factors that seem to be critical to both short-term and long-term success. We have observed both positive and negative factors that seem to determine whether a board can achieve the level of excellence that either governance model promises.

This article will focus on the positive conditions that we believe contribute to success. The antitheses of these conditions are easily identified as factors that can diminish the likelihood of any board’s success – hopefully not your own board’s!

So just what are the apparent ingredients that combine to produce excellent governing? These are clear to us:

- **Genuine commitment of the board.** As obvious as this appears, it isn’t always present. Some boards are intrigued with the idea, but less than fully committed to actually doing the work to achieve it. Adopting a complete new and different governing model isn’t the same as playing with a shiny new toy, which invariably grows old after a time. Commitment means learning new behaviors, exercising self and group discipline to remain “model consistent” as you govern in a new way. It means resisting the temptation to blame the model when the first challenge hits—as it surely will.

Commitment to and nurturing confidence in the model provide the sturdy and basic foundation for effective implementation and achieving excellent results for the organization over the long term.

- **The board’s willingness to change old behaviors.** It should be clear that adopting a completely new and different way of doing business

requires old habits and customs to change. Easy to say and always harder to do. We try to challenge boards to consider that this is the very first meeting of this board; it has no history. If the board had such a luxury, how would it choose to structure how it gets work done? Would it rebuild a culture exactly like the one it has been practicing, or would it create a completely fresh one, unencumbered with history and tradition – *the way we've always done it?*

We are not saying that every past practice is unworthy, but rather suggesting that a board must be willing to free itself from past practice and create a culture that is based upon thoughtful exploration of what is possible, not what it is comfortable with. It is a call for WSOD – a *willing suspension of disbelief* – as you let go of the ring and fly up to the next level of performance. It calls for historical appreciation, but not living in history.

- **Recognition that a new governing model will not automatically solve all old problems.** Occasionally we have been invited to work with a board that is so dysfunctional that anything that floats by looks like a life preserver. Sometimes boards find themselves in such distress that they are tempted to adopt the view that if they can just adopt CG or PG, all their internal problems will go away. Typically, the problems they are dealing with are people problems, not structural problems: lack of trust, poor communication, a history of divisive behaviors.

It is true that adopting a sound operating system can provide the structure to help boards deal with the tough people problems. Governance Culture and Board/CEO Relationship policies are designed to do just that. But until such dysfunctional conditions are addressed, no governing system in itself will make life good again for such boards.

- **Boards must have patience.** Changing to a new way of getting work done requires time and practice. When we work with boards, we frequently ask members to write their names on a pad. Then we ask them to place the pen in their opposite hand, and do it again. Then we analyze what they experienced. They typically say that the second time was slower, messier, awkward, required more attention and thought. In general, the non-preferred hand was less efficient with a less-desirable, even childish outcome. Implementing a new governing model can be that way.

In order to gain efficiency and achieve the desired outcome, new behaviors must be learned and new skills developed. This requires time, practice and patience. This is why we strongly encourage boards to maintain an extended coaching relationship, providing an outside “eye” to identify, address and facilitate improvement for the board its members and

staff, whose working life will change, just as will the board's. Remember, even champions need coaching!

- **A CEO who is confident in his own abilities, willing to assume accountability for independent actions, and supportive of the board's new role.** Some CEOs say they support the board's venture into a governing model that requires them to exercise independent leadership and be held accountable for it, but then they continue to seek board approvals for decisions that are theirs to make –either out of fear or tradition. Some CEOs openly resist the board's new level of governing leadership and policy-level control, and set up roadblocks of infinite types. Some go into this work thinking it will “control” the board, only to discover that the board simultaneously can become more active in exercising control but less intrusive with micromanagement. Others may be unwilling to change their own administrative behaviors to align the organization with the board's governing culture.

When a board adopts either Coherent Governance or Policy Governance, it changes not only its own way of doing business, but maybe equally dramatically, it changes the way the organization does its work. If a CEO either is unwilling or incapable of transforming the organization as necessary and to support the board, the board's good work can be painfully slow or aborted.

- **Support necessary to allow the board to succeed.** Adopting either of these governing models requires more support for board processes than the old system required. The board must have staff support to assure rigorous, accurate and on-time monitoring records, to maintain the annual work plan, and to manage the logistics of a linkage or community engagement plan.

Our most successful clients have found support through top-notch administrative assistants. School boards in Fairfax, VA, San Diego, CA, Racine, WI and Issaquah, WA leap to mind as examples of excellent support systems.

- **A board's willingness to deal effectively with the outliers.** When we first started this work, we had a company policy that required a board to agree unanimously to pursue the governing model. We later relaxed that requirement, moving to a requirement for a “critical mass” in order to prevent a single member from determining the future of the entire board. Nevertheless, attention must be paid to those members who may not be in sync with the board majority. They come in all forms, ranging from willing but not enthusiastic, to true skeptics, to declared opponents, to outright saboteurs. Those who are willing to join the board majority and try to make it work, despite some reservations, usually come on board. Their views

are important and must be heard. Over time, there is a good chance that the board's success will elevate their level of support. It is the saboteurs that concern us. These are the members who not only oppose what the majority is doing, but also try to assure that the whole venture fails. Their overt behaviors can take several forms, but you know them by their actions.

A board cannot allow its own members to divert its attention or waste its time, nor can it allow the destructive agendas of a single member, or a distinct minority, to determine the board's fate. We still govern in a democracy by majority rule. A number of possible remedies are available to the board to help deal with destructive behaviors, and those must be used as the board continues to seek to build unity and focus.

- **Recognition that the model is a means, not the end.** Adopting a new governance operating system is an important step for any board. At the beginning, there are new process and behaviors to learn, and it takes careful attention by the members to learn how to use the new tools available to the board. But we have seen boards become so consumed with "getting it right" that they became slaves to the model, rather than using the model as a way to get board work done.

There is a high level of discipline required of a board in order to live with the commitments it has made in policy. That said, within a reasonable period of time, the board and staff should be comfortable with this operating system as its adopted platform and practice using it to focus on getting Results.

There are a number of other conditions that contribute to a board's likely success in implementing either of these governing models, but these we have observed as critical. If any one of them is not present, the board labors under a major disadvantage as it tries to make the transition.

Building a new governance culture and executing systemic and accountable leadership to make a difference for those you serve is difficult, even when all the stars line up just right. To achieve sustainable governing excellence, to fulfill your hope and promise for leadership, it is critical to self-assess against these criteria and find the way to resolve crippling issues. *Make it so!*

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