



Board Member Essentials: Providing Constructive Feedback

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A 3D graphic of a red cube with a white border. The number "12" is printed in a large, bold, yellow font on the right side of the cube.

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Board Member Essentials: Providing Constructive Feedback

Introduction

Preserving the integrity of the team is essential for the practice of excellence in governance. One difficult task for board members is providing constructive timely feedback. It is input which helps others while they navigate through difficult situations or deal with demanding stakeholders.

When board members provide feedback they are letting others know how they feel about particular situations or actions. Withholding feedback or providing it to people who cannot act on it, is unfair to the board members in question or the CEO.

Feedback is useful because it indicates when things are going as expected or for redirecting another's actions.

This article addresses why constructive feedback is necessary, the difficulties associated with feedback, how to state observations and concerns, the importance of describing your reactions, the necessity of giving the other person time to respond without interruption, the importance of giving specific ideas, and how to positively close the exchange.

Why Constructive Feedback Is Necessary

In order to preserve the integrity of the team and enable the expression of diverse ideas and opinions, it is essential for board members to offer their opinions in a constructive manner. Each board member's input is best received when it is

- designed to support what is wanted by the board rather than an expression of what is not wanted.
- phrased in a manner intended to bring the board member, committee or CEO back on track without criticizing what has been done to date.
- directly related to the situation at hand and does not bring up past irrelevant situations.
- focused on the issue rather than the people assigned to carry out the action or plan.

When a board member does not confine his actions as outlined above, he may experience one or more of the pitfalls associated with feedback.

Recognizing the Difficulties Associated With Feedback

Given the reality that board members are very busy, it is possible to engage in practices which do not support positive action and preserve of ability of the team to function cohesively in the future.

The first difficult is "getting it off our chests." This happens when a board member is upset and does not stop to think of the other person(s). Feelings, ideas and opinions are stated without consideration of the feelings of others and the long term ramifications. When a board member is angry, others react to the anger and often miss the key message.

Sometimes it is helpful to for a board member to

- vent in private to the board chair
- let some time pass before deciding how it is best to proceed and express his concerns
- ensure his concerns are stated in the appropriate forum, and/or
- observe when the person is most likely to be receptive to his feedback.

How to State Observations and Concerns

When a board member wants to be taken seriously, it is important for him to be very specific about his concerns and focus on direct observations rather than third party stories or rumors. When a board member speaks in general terms and cannot provide reliable information, it can be confusing and perceived as interference rather than support.

If too much feedback is given at once it may not be able to be processed. The person may shut down and the board member may not realize his goal for the conversation.

Provide only the information which is essential at this time and acknowledge the information which includes

- information others told you
- details others states while acknowledging they do not have direct experience themselves (rumors)
- actions you observed, and
- what you expected and how it is different from what you believe is happening.

Describing Your Reactions and Giving the Other Person Time to Respond

It is easy for a board member to state how he is feeling and to show it on his face and in his body language. It takes more effort to stop and state

- the behaviour or situation based on actual observations
- the impact of the situation on himself or someone else
- what the board member or the board as a whole expects
- the focus of the issue at hand, and
- the consequences or risks of not staying on course.

By stating, the situation this way the board member gives the receiver time to see things from another perspective. The receiver can determine the actions he needs to take to bring the situation back on course.

Give the Other Person (Receiver) Time to Respond

When a board member gives the receiver time to respond, it helps him maintain his self-esteem. It demonstrates that the board member values his ideas and wants to hear his concerns. The receiver may have suggestions you did not think about. One never knows but it is possible that

- the observations are inaccurate
- the stories were only partially relayed, and
- there are intervening circumstances that were not discussed at the board table at the time the decision was made because all the facts were not known.

By listening to the receiver, the board member may

- learn valuable information he did not know
- gain a broader perspective on the situation
- ensure continued open communication
- save face or embarrassment if his views or stories prove to be incomplete or inaccurate,

- be ensuring he is treated in the same dignified manner when he is the receiver, and
- help to maintain the integrity of the team.

When a board member is specific in his words and actions, his communication is clear and free of any ambiguities.

Stating Specific Ideas

Unfortunately, feedback is often negative and to the point. It is offered in a manner which is critical and it is seen as a personal attack. The key is that feedback is intended to improve the situation, provide clarifications, set the record straight, or provide new clear directions. Therefore, it is vital that feedback be sincere, focused on the issue, and intended to preserve the dignity of the other board member or CEO.

When feedback is constructive it provides specific ideas about how to

- improve relationships
- move beyond minimum expectations or standards
- be more efficient or effective
- use newer methods or techniques
- access the right people or resources, and
- satisfy the people who set the expectations.

The feedback

- is practical
- is doable
- is reasonable
- is ethical

- provides ideas which are within that person's sphere of influence or sphere of control, and
- acknowledges resource limitations.

It is essential to ensure the receiver understands the key components or ideas and what is expected of him in the future.

Constructively Closing the Exchange

Prior to ending any exchange, it is necessary to summarize what has been said and what is expected in the future. It is a time when the board member demonstrates his support for the new idea, direction or process, and support for the individual in question.

It provides a time to end the exchange on a constructive note preserving the personal and or professional relationship.

Final Comment

Maintaining relationships and preserving the integrity of the board team is critical. One way to support the team is by providing constructive timely feedback. Feedback is designed to help others efficiently and effectively perform tasks while dealing with challenges.

When board members provide feedback, they are letting others know how they feel about particular situations and providing information which may not be available to the person carrying out the actions. Feedback is very useful because keeps the lines of communication open and it demonstrates that the board members are engaged and interested.