

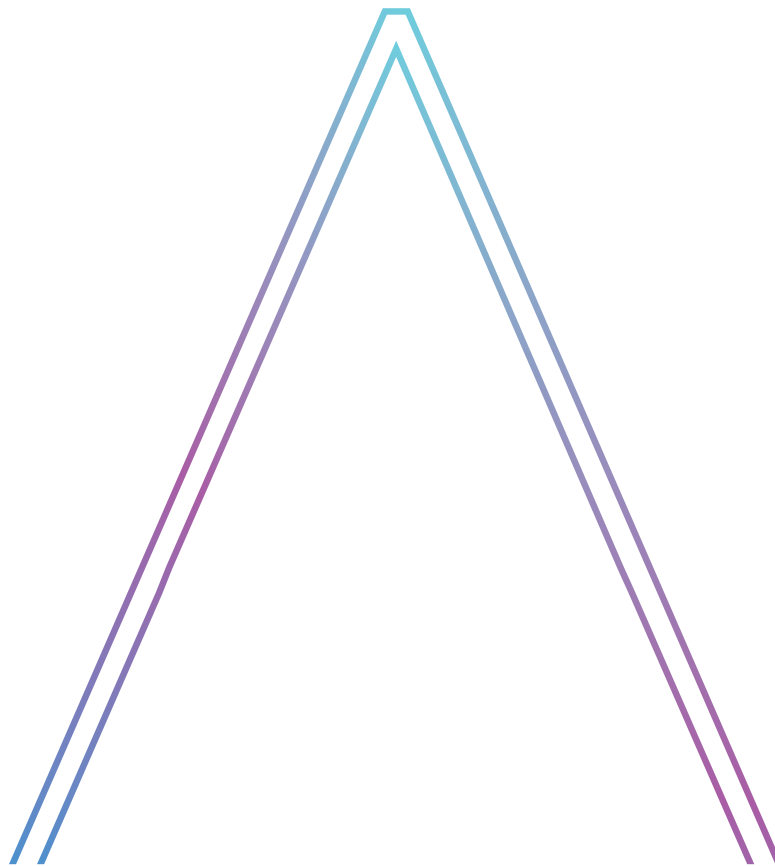


DESIGNING
THE DIRECTOR
EXPERIENCE



Board member performance—indeed, the performance of your entire board—will be stronger when you create a collaborative, open, learning-focused board service experience. Here's how to design a meaningful director experience to ensure that your board governs the organization to thrive in the future.

BY JEFF DE CAGNA, FRSA, FSAE



Association boards must strengthen their performance as they continue to confront and navigate the intensifying impact of societal transformation. For board presiding officers (BPOs), to whom the primary responsibility for building high-performing boards belongs, the desired destination may appear obvious, but how to get there is anything but clear.

What BPOs need is a disciplined approach for nurturing board capacity that looks beyond the orthodox beliefs of association governing. This approach brings a more holistic perspective to the capacity-building effort and creates an environment in which stronger board performance can emerge.

The core of this fresh approach is a focus on developing a compelling “director experience,” or DX. Over the last two decades, much has been learned about the essential role that experience plays in creating value for customers (CX) and technology users (UX). In that time, the discussion about creating meaningful experiences has expanded to include employees, patients and physicians in healthcare, tenants in commercial real estate, and stakeholders in other fields. Given the critical role association boards play, there is every reason to design an enriching director experience that can help strengthen board performance.

DX BEGINS WITH INTENTIONAL LEARNING

Associations are operating in a world in which transformation is getting deeper, more rapid, and more intense. This requires BPOs—working in partnership with their chief staff executives—to adopt a more helpful definition of governing: an intentional and dynamic process for enabling the coherence, capability, and continuity of the system. (In this context, a “system” can refer to a single association or a collection of organizations operating in a coordinated manner.)

Through the work of governing, and in concert with staff and other contributors, boards must collaborate to ensure the systems for which they are responsible

- have clear reasons for being and clear outcomes they intend to achieve (coherence)
- can take effective action to make progress toward achieving those outcomes (capability)
- can thrive even as they confront the disruptive impact of societal transformation (continuity).

This forward-looking definition of governing reveals the significance of intentional learning as the lifeblood of high-performing boards. Today and in the years ahead, associations need diverse, curious, and insatiable learners at the board table who are capable of deep reflection, self-directed inquiry, and collaborative learning within the board’s team dynamic.

Designing the director experience with a fundamental commitment to intentional learning creates an opening for BPOs to examine association orthodoxies—in particular, that knowledge and experience are the most important requirements for board candidates—and bring a more integrative point of view to identifying, recruiting, selecting, and preparing directors for board service.

DX LIVES IN GOVERNING INTENT

A different definition of governing not only raises the stakes for association boards, it also demands more of them.

Boards need to make clear how they will go about realizing their organizations’ full potential by codifying governing intent—a specific expression of the outcomes the board will strive to achieve through stewardship. Governing intent helps all stakeholders understand the deeper sense of purpose that animates the board’s work.

In the context of governing intent, BPOs and their board colleagues must make three critical connections as part of any director experience design:

- the connection between director motivation and board expectation
- the connection between the board’s orientation and director contribution
- the connection between director attention and the board’s efforts to enable new value creation.

Connecting motivation and expectation. Most potential directors can

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explain their reasons for wanting to serve on the board. Some of those reasons, such as resume building or the desire to become an officer, may be self-interested, while others may be more selfless. More important is the need to understand clearly the motivations that underpin those reasons. Designing the director experience to create a capable board means actively shaping directors' motivations with crisply articulated organizational expectations that reinforce the board's team dynamic.

Making an explicit connection between director motivation and board expectation is crucial to increasing the board's resilience in the face of both external and internal disruption. A clear link between motivation and expectation encourages trust among directors and can limit any unproductive friction that may arise if directors sense a disconnect between the promise and the reality of board service and begin to question the wisdom of the choice to serve. This kind of doubt is an avoidable distraction

that can have a negative effect on both the director experience—including attendance, preparation, and participation—and overall board performance.

Connecting orientation and contribution. Traditionally, board orientation is an occasional activity conducted only for the board's newest members to ensure they are sufficiently informed before they participate in meetings for the first time. This view of orientation, however, is too restrictive and ultimately unhelpful.

Instead, for organizations operating in a dynamic environment, orientation must be a social process that helps establish the common context in which all directors can contribute meaningfully to the board's work. It should be less about conveying information and more about creating an ongoing conversation in which directors can share their worldviews, influenced by intentional learning, and collaborate to explore them in a productive way.

BPOs can encourage a more expansive approach to orientation to help directors develop an enduring sense of responsibility to be full and active contributors. In addition, by treating orientation as a lens through which they can examine the subtle contours and sharp edges of their evolving thinking about critical questions, boards can create beneficial intellectual friction that enriches the contributions all directors make to every aspect of the work of governing.

Connecting attention and creation. One of the more detrimental orthodox beliefs about association governing is that it requires directors to spend too much time on board work. The length of board meetings is a frequent target of this criticism. No one questions that most directors are busy people or that their time is a valuable commodity that must be "invested" with care. Yet it is the ability to properly apply board members' attention—an inherently scarcer and far more precious resource—to creating positive outcomes for the system and its stakeholders that will determine the effectiveness and impact of board performance in the years ahead.

Today's fast-paced, technology-enabled world fragments directors' attention long before they arrive for any board meeting or conference call. This issue likely will get worse before it gets better. With that difficult constraint in mind, BPOs and their board colleagues must increase their readiness to concentrate their energy and attention on the vital learning and decision-making conversations that will inform strategy, inspire innovation, and impel continuous value creation for the organization's stakeholders.

DX NURTURES INTERDEPENDENT PERFORMANCE

A robust director experience results in a board composed of stewards who recognize that they cannot achieve high performance if they operate as a collection of talented yet independent contributors. The capable boards that every presiding officer and chief staff executive wants and needs will emerge only through truly interdependent collaboration—the performance

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of each director can flourish only in relationship with the high performance of other directors. While individual directors' personal commitment to their governing work is indispensable, it is only when boards fully embrace the need for deep interaction as a team that the sum becomes greater than the parts.

The inescapable reality of relentless societal transformation increases the difficulty of the challenges that board presiding officers must handle. Boards must enable the coherence, capability, and continuity of the systems for which they are

responsible, and this means that average or below-average performance is unacceptable.

Put simply, nurturing high-performing boards (and presiding officers) is critical to the long-term ability of associations and their stakeholders to thrive. BPOs who are ready to accept this serious responsibility should take immediate action to design a vibrant director experience in collaboration with their board colleagues—one that transcends association orthodoxy and inspires a new cohort of potential directors to choose board service and undertake the critical work of capably governing associations in the 21st century.

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