Strategic or Tactical Board?
Bob Harris, CAE

The board meets for the purpose of governance. Governance is described by most state corporate statutes as adherence to policies or governing documents and the continuous monitoring of their implementation. The principal duties of a board include advancing the mission, protecting assets and serving the membership.

To govern the board should be strategic. Strategy is defined as a method or plan chosen to bring about a desired future, such as achieving a goal or solutions to a problem. Strategy can be characterized as thinking at a higher level and for the longer-term.

A problem occurs when a board is characterized as tactical. Tactical can be defined as lower level work that should be carried out by committees and staff.

Strategy and desired outcomes is set by the board so that staff and committees can align resources and achieve the results.

The problem is when a board falls below strategy and becomes tactical. It is sometimes masked by the enthusiasm of the discussion. For example, in a discussion about a problem, the conversation drops to tactics: “Who will staff the registration desk?” “Will we provide coffee?” “Should we select a new theme?”

Avoiding the Weeds

Board members should want to focus their efforts on visionary discussions. This requires more strategy than tactics.

Meetings focused on tactical thinking require more time. They produce less significant results. Directors become frustrated if time is wasted discussing the details of implementation and application.

Techniques to increase opportunity for strategy and less tactics include:

- Consent Agenda - The consent agenda is single entry on the primary agenda that packages items the board should read but require no action or discussion, for instance staff and officer updates. Use of a consent agenda can save 30 to 60 minutes, redirecting the time for substantive issues. It requires discipline to submit timely reports and hold the directors accountable for coming prepared by
reading the reports. The chief elected officer should enforce accountability among directors.

- **Agenda Design** – Asked why the agenda is in its current form and the usual answer is, “It’s always looked like this.” There are ways to design an agenda that advances the work and supports strategic discussions. Consider adding the goals from the strategic plan right on the agenda, and include the mission at the bottom. Add time indicators so directors know what’s expected with each item and when to move on. Or break the agenda into sections, for instance: 1. Association Business, 2. Strategic Decisions, 3. Visionary Thinking. Remove “New Business” from the agenda by asking directors to submit ideas in advance according to policy or precedent.

- **Room Set Up** – There are room set-ups that facilitate meaningful discussions. The most common is an open U so each person feels equal; able to hear and see each other. The room environment should be comfortable. A cold, tight, dark room will not enhance outcomes.

- **All Eyes on the Screen** – Some boards distribute reams of paper in the form of reports and information. Consider less paper by giving directors access to the information on a screen. Project the report being discussed on a central screen so all board members are focused on the correct document. Directors will bring their own computers to have documents at their fingertips.

- **Dashboards** – Dashboards are graphic representation of reports and data. Improve understanding and save time by transforming a 10 minute update on membership, for instance, into a single graphic in the form of a thermometer or gauge. Use the same dashboards so directors recognize trends and gaps. Ask the board to select up to a dozen dashboards it would like to review at each meeting.

- **Knowledge Based Discussions** – Encourage the board to base discussions and decisions on facts. Too often discussions are moved by passion or group think. Group think is the practice of approaching problems or issues as matters that are best dealt with by consensus of a group rather than by individuals acting independently. Directors should ask tough questions before making decisions, exercising duty of care and fiduciary duties. Use external benchmarks to compare data from similar organizations.

- **We’re in the Weeds** – One of the most powerful comments at the board table is, “We’re in the weeds.” If conversations appear to fall below governance, directors and staff should recognize the problem and pose the statement.
Nobody wants to conclude a meeting wondering if anything was achieved. Involve the officers in the design of meetings that advance the mission and goals without dropping into tactics. Orient the directors to their roles in governance and the distinction between strategy and tactics.

#   #   #

Note: Bob Harris, CAE, provides free governance tips and templates at [www.nonprofitcenter.com](http://www.nonprofitcenter.com).