Governance is characterized as a high-level, strategic effort by a governing body. An association board should advance a cause or mission, serve stakeholders and make best use of resources.

For some staff executives, it is only a dream to get the board thinking strategically. Many describe their board meetings as a social gathering, not producing significant results.

**Gaining Altitude**

I fly several times a week. With every flight I am aware that as we take-off I can see further to the horizon. City streets turn into neighborhoods. The higher the flight the more I see entire communities, portions of the state, coastlines and mountains. As the flight gains altitude my thoughts are free to soar.

Contrast the perspectives of an airline flight to the boardroom. Directors enter, sit at a table, open an information packet, listen to reports and deliberate. The agenda guides discussions that must be completed before adjournment. Eventually directors check their watches with thoughts of departing.

**Help the Board Soar**

The intent is to maximize the time, expertise and experience of directors. Challenge them to solve problems and position the organization.

"With the help of the board and volunteers AIA Pennsylvania has become a high-functioning, high-achieving organization. The work we're doing now will give us a road map to make us better, so we owe it to ourselves and the members to maintain a clear focus on the outcome and keep things simple. As Steve Jobs said, 'you have to work hard to get your thinking clean to make it simple but it's worth it in the end because once you get there, you can move mountains,'” explained Stephen M Swarney, J.D., Executive Director of AIA Pennsylvania.

There are at least three ways to push the board as high as possible, without buying them plane tickets.

**Strategy** – A board creates and relies upon a strategic plan to guide future endeavors. Without a plan, the issue-of-the-day or the priorities of this year’s president drive efforts.
Though directors must think strategically, some cannot distinguish strategy from tactics.

For instance, a motion is made to create a multi-state regional conference inviting new stakeholders, starting in two years. Quickly the conversation drops to, “how will we market it,” “will coffee be free,” and “should we offer childcare services.” They went tactical without recognizing it.

One way to maintain altitude is to keep the strategic plan on the board table. Some organizations laminate it for frequent reference. Format as a placemat to position it as at every board seat. Frequently ask, “How does this discussion advance our strategic plan?”

Integrate the strategic plan into the meeting agenda. Include the mission statement on the bottom and the goals as items of business.

**Governance Altimeter** – Monitor the level of governance. A board operates at a higher level than committees and staff. If the board will set a direction, committees and staff work to advance the direction.

Too often board meetings descend to doing committee work at the board table. Some boards fall to micromanagement, telling the staff how to do their jobs.

Remind directors that the board operates at 50,000 feet and higher. Committees supplement the work of the board at 25,000 feet. The IRS defines the staffing as implementing the board’s initiatives; that would be about 10,000 feet.

**In the Weeds** – If directors know their discussions should be strategic, then they should recognize when they are “in the weeds.”

Help boards stay out of the weeds. Be bold enough to point out that the discussion level dropped, and the rest of the board is eager to move on.

Organizations have found innovative ways to stay out of the weeds. Because directors are quick to chase squirrels that distract from getting the work done, keep a stuffed toy squirrel on the table, passing it to the director who caused the chase up a tree.

Another technique is a sign, “*We are in the weeds,*” to remind directors who went tactical in their discussions. Keep it on the board table, using it when discussions drop to committee and staff work. Just the statement alone is enough to get the discussion to a higher level, “This feels like we are in the weeds.”
To achieve meaningful results, a board must maintain altitude. There is a tendency to fall below the governance level, into management or committee work. Use techniques to keep the board soaring.

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Note: Bob Harris, CAE, provides free governance tops and templates at www.nonprofitcenter.com.