

Benchmarking the Board-Executive Director Relationship of The Fayette Foundation

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Executive Summary

The Fayette Foundation is a young, nonprofit organization in Lexington. Although it has only been incorporated for four years, it has already raised over one million dollars to fulfill the organization's mission. The executive director has been with the organization for two years and

believes that a strong relationship with the board is important for the success of the organization. As a result, the executive director would like to find out how to maximize the effectiveness of the board-executive director relationship.

The research question asks what makes an effective board-executive director relationship, as well as which elements of the organization or board might be related to the effectiveness of the board-executive director relationship. To answer this question, an extensive literature review was performed to develop a survey instrument. The developed survey consists of questions that allow an analysis of the effectiveness of the board-executive director relationship. The survey also includes questions that could help establish a correlation between various elements of an organization and the effectiveness of this relationship. The sample consisted of organizations in the Lexington area that belong to the same professional association as The Fayette Foundation. Executive directors of these nonprofit organizations took the survey on a website at their own convenience.

The results of the survey found that, on average, the samples' boards managed their meetings well, had low levels of in-fighting, established clear guidelines for decision making authority and demonstrated a commitment to the organization's mission and values. However, the sample had a lower average on items related to board involvement in fundraising and the development of clear expectations for the executive. There was a medium strength correlation between executive director tenure and an index of governance effectiveness developed from questions in the survey. Also, higher levels of communication between the executive director and board members (excluding the president of the board) was also positively correlated with governance effectiveness. However, board size was found to be only slightly positively correlated with board effectiveness.

The results of this survey can be used to help The Fayette Foundation's board members benchmark their relationship with the executive director. Even if they are doing extremely well in this area, there is always room for improvement, and this survey can help them identify potential improvements for the board-executive director relationship.

Statement of the Problem

The executive director of The Fayette Foundation is the only full-time employee of the organization, and she answers to a governing board of fifty people. Although she has several years of experience in public relations, this is the first time that she has been executive director of a nonprofit organization. Prior to hiring an executive director, the board members ran the organization under the leadership of the board president, who also founded The Fayette Foundation. The executive director of The Fayette Foundation has helped the organization expand its fundraising efforts, create order and structure within the organization, and develop the groundwork for future growth. The board is happy with her management of the organization, yet board members are highly involved in the day-to-day activities of the organization. The executive director spends numerous hours each week speaking with board members and trying to manage relationships with all fifty board members. Since the executive director has only been with The Fayette Foundation for two years, maintaining her relationships with board members sometimes has to take priority over other responsibilities. It can be difficult for the executive director to balance all of her tasks, and she is continually seeking out ways to improve her performance so that the organization will run more smoothly. At this time, the executive

director of The Fayette Foundation would like to learn more about how to improve her interactions and relationships with the board.

The Fayette Foundation was incorporated four years ago, but it has already pledged over one million dollars to organizations with a common philanthropic mission. In the past four years, The Fayette Foundation has gone from hosting one fundraising event each year to hosting three fundraising events and an educational seminar each year. In their newsletter and various press releases, the board and executive director have expressed their pleasure with the success of The Fayette Foundation in these areas. Despite these successes, the executive director would still like to find out what the key is to a more effective board-executive director relationship. The executive director would like to see how other nonprofit executives in the Lexington area view issues related to chief executive relationships with governing boards.

¹ The Fayette Foundation is a pseudonym used to refer to the target organization to protect the confidentiality of the board and staff.

Research Question

There are two research questions for this study. First, what makes an effective board-executive director relationship? Second, which elements of the organization or board might be related to the effectiveness of the board-executive director relationship?

Background Information

The use of a governing board as a major decision-making body is an integral component of the nonprofit sector. While board members are not paid and often perform the duties of volunteers, they have additional responsibilities that differ from those of a normal volunteer. States have passed different laws to define permissible behaviors for board members, usually including the idea that board members must act in good faith when making decisions for the organization. The Kentucky Revised Statutes state that a director (board member) “shall discharge his duties as a director, including his duties as a member of a committee: (a) In good faith; (b) On an informed basis; and (c) In a manner he honestly believes to be in the best interests of the corporation.” (Kentucky Revised Statutes 273.215, 1989). Board members can be held liable for the harmful actions of the organization and in some situations can even be sued as agents of the organization (Duca, 1996). Directors and Officers Insurance can be purchased to financially protect board members, but appropriate behavior is still a responsibility that board members must always demonstrate.

Nonprofit boards also have authority to make major decisions about the organization. Boards can be responsible for performing a myriad of duties including setting the mission, strategic planning, budgeting, and hiring an executive director. As a result, board members hold a large portion of the power within nonprofit organizations. Since executive directors do not hold the concentrated power of a CEO’s in a for-profit organization, they must build a good working relationship with the board to ensure that positive decisions are made for the organization. For nonprofit executives, Collins recommends using “legislative leadership” to be respectful of the board’s power while still working towards positive decisions for the organization. Legislative leadership relies on persuasion, political currency, and shared interests in order to create an environment in which the right decisions can be made (Collins, 2005).

The board of The Fayette Foundation meets two times a year after their fall and spring events. An executive committee meets on a more regular basis between these semi-annual meetings and this committee makes most of the actual decisions of a governing board. Since the full board only meets twice a year, the executive committee has to make decisions that cannot wait until one of the semi-annual meetings. The president is also the founder and has a permanent spot on

the executive committee. The Fayette Foundation also has several standing committees to help plan events, handle finance issues, and award grants among other things. The full board usually endorses the work that is accomplished by these committees. Members can be assigned to committees or taken off committees at the beginning of the year.

What Makes an Effective Board-Executive Director Relationship?

A review of the literature on board-executive director relationships suggests that four factors are critical to governance effectiveness. (1) executive director perceptions of board engagement in the organization, (2) expectations for the executive director, (3) expectations for the board and (4) board-executive director communication. Literature on these topics suggests these factors are important in building a solid board-executive director relationship.

Board engagement in the organization

There are several ways boards can be effectively engaged in the work of the organization. Vartorella suggests that boards should be held accountable for fundraising for the organization and that annual giving comes with the responsibilities of being a board member (Vartorella, 1997). Research by Wolf suggests that if board members are not giving back to the organization and are not soliciting funds, then the organization could have some problems when it comes to recruiting outside donors (Wolf, 1999).

Another way to help keep board members active in the organization is to provide orientation for new board members. Orientation can include a number of items ranging from providing a board manual to giving out an annual job description for board members to having a formal informational session. Orientation gives new board members a chance to become familiar with the organization and the responsibilities of being on the board (Koch, 2003). In fact, Koch contends that orientation and training are “a must” (Koch, 2003).

Regular attendance at meetings is also important for board engagement. Reading the minutes of the meeting or participating via electronic means is not judged to be a good substitute for attendance at the board meetings (Kilmister & Nahkies, 2004). The measures included in this survey were designed to gauge the level of board engagement in Lexington nonprofits.

Expectations for the executive director

In the formal structure of nonprofit organizations, executive directors are directly below the board. Having an executive director that is clearly accountable to a functioning board is a situation unique to nonprofit organizations (Drucker, 1989). As a result, executive directors should strive to meet the needs and expectations of the board. According to Swanson, these needs and expectations can include regularly reporting on the status of the organization and carrying out the goals and objectives for the organization set forth by the board. In order to make informed decisions for the organization, the board needs to receive regular reports on the status of the organization (Swanson, 1989). The board can also outline organizational objectives for its executive director (Swanson, 1989). Even though the board may be at the top of the organizational chart, it is important that board members and the executive director see each other as colleagues working to achieve the same goals (Drucker, 1989).

Expectations for the board

According to nonprofit fiduciary statutes, the board members of nonprofit organizations are generally charged with the duty of care, the duty of loyalty, and the duty of obedience (Gibelman, Gelman & Pollack 1997). These duties entail acting prudently when making decisions regarding the organization, acting in the best interests of the organization instead of the best interests of the board member, and being obedient to the mission and goals of the organization (Gibelman, Gelman & Pollack 1997). While these legal responsibilities may vary

slightly from state to state, these are the basic legal expectations for board members. However, the executive director will have additional expectations of board members in order to help the organization run smoothly. A major task that the board must undertake is the evaluation of the executive director's performance. This task is one of the main responsibilities the board as a whole must undertake (Iecovich, 2004). This responsibility goes hand in hand with the board's responsibility to hire and potentially fire executives. Boards should also focus on long-term planning for their organizations, as it is their responsibility to set the goals for their organizations (Carver, 1990). Carver also asserts that boards should strive to be open and accountable to their stakeholders and their communities (Carver 1990). Board members hold a great deal of responsibility and their involvement is crucial to the success of the organization.

Board-executive director communication

According to research in this area, clarity of roles and expectations is critical to having a successful board-executive director partnership. Regular communication is also an important component of a successful partnership. It is recommended that the executive director and the board president communicate at least once per week in order to keep the lines of communication open (Koch, 2003). For The Fayette Foundation, the executive director spends a large portion of her time communicating with board members outside of meetings. The board is actively interested in the organization and there is no magic number of hours or minutes that is the best amount of communication time between executive directors and board members. However, the executive director is still interested in seeing how often other executive directors are communicating with their board members. The board should also clarify the decisions on which they should be consulted, and which decisions the executive director can be responsible for (Eadie, 1996). Likewise, the executive director should ensure that board members understand the responsibilities that come with being on the board of the organization (Weisman, 1995).

Research Methodology

To examine these features of nonprofit board-executive director relationships in Central Kentucky, I developed a survey to be administered to the directors of a set of nonprofit organizations. The survey was administered via a website to fifty-nine executive directors of nonprofit organizations. The executive directors were contacted by phone prior to receiving an e-mail invitation to complete the survey in case they had any questions or concerns about the study. This delivery method for the survey allowed the executives to complete the survey at the time that best suited them. However, if the executive did not have access to the internet, he/she was offered the opportunity to take the survey over the phone. A week after initial contact, a reminder was sent to the organizations that had not yet completed the survey.

The sample organizations consist of members of a professional association to which The Fayette Foundation belongs and with which it has consulted in the past. Members of the professional association included in the sample are located in Lexington, Kentucky, and have a paid executive director. The executive director of The Fayette Foundation also completed the survey. All participants were guaranteed confidentiality so that no information gathered by these surveys would come back to harm the executive director or the organization in any way. The executive director of The Fayette Foundation requested that I use the name "The Fayette Foundation" for her organization rather than the real organization name. She wants to learn how to continually improve her organization without risking any harm to the organization.

The executive director of The Fayette Foundation perceives her board in a certain way, and this survey was designed to accurately capture patterns of many different aspects of board functioning in a large set of non-profit organizations. Therefore, the best respondents for

comparison purposes would be executive directors/CEOs of the organizations included in the sample. This survey views the boards of Lexington nonprofits through the eyes of the executives.

Several assessment tools have been developed by researchers to examine the impact of the board on the organization as whole. The Governance Effectiveness Quick Check is a test that measures the effect of board practices on the overall health of the organization. This tool was developed by Gill, Flynn and Reissing as an abridged version of their Governance Self-Assessment Checklist (Gill, Flynn and Reissing, 2005). The Governance Self-Assessment Checklist tests 144 items and assigns a Governance Quotient to each organization that shows the effectiveness of board governance practices. This research determined that there was a high correlation between the scores on the Governance Effectiveness Quick Check and the Governance Self-Assessment Checklist (Gill, Flynn and Reissing, 2005). This survey included questions from the Governance Effectiveness Quick Check to gauge the overall performance of the boards in question.

The survey consists of twenty-nine close-ended questions and three open-ended questions. The close-ended questions required a few words for response, a multiple choice answer or an answer based on a Likert scale. For these statements the following Likert scale was used; 1, strongly disagree, 2, disagree, 3, somewhat disagree, 4, somewhat agree, 5, agree, and 6, strongly agree. These statements were designed so that a 6, strongly agree is the best answer and 1, strongly disagree is the worst answer. There were three statements where strongly disagree was the best answer and strongly agree was the worst answer, but the statements and answers to these statements were inverted after the survey collection was complete. Fifteen of the questions in the survey were taken directly from other survey instruments while seventeen of the questions were developed based on the literature review. The answers to each of the numerically based answers and Likert scale statements were averaged so the board of The Fayette Foundation can use that information to benchmark itself.

Organizations were also given an overall score for their answers on the Likert scale statements as a measure of governance effectiveness. The overall score was tallied by averaging the Likert scale answers for each organization. This is the method that Gill, Flynn and Reissing used to measure governance effectiveness in their quick check model (Gill, Flynn & Reissing, 2005). The Likert scale used in this study can therefore be referred to as The Index of Governance Effectiveness. The Index of Governance Effectiveness for each organization could be compared to other aspects of the organization to help determine if there was a correlation between a certain aspect of the organization and the overall score. The Pearson product moment correlation coefficient was used to examine the degree of correlation between these items and to determine whether the linear relationship was positive or negative. The correlation coefficient can range from -1 to 1. In this range, 0 means that there is no relationship, positive values mean that there is a positive relationship between the variables and negative values mean that there is a negative relationship between the variables. A coefficient of 1 means that the data form a perfect positive relationship while a coefficient of -1 means that the data form a perfect negative relationship. Significance was determined by looking at the p-value for these coefficients to see if the relationship between the variables was statistically significant at better than the 10%, 5% or 1% levels.

A set of open-ended questions were designed to identify the biggest problems facing executive directors in Lexington. These questions gave the executive directors a chance to identify potential solutions to these problems as well. The responses of the open-ended

questions could also provide helpful advice to the executive director of The Fayette Foundation, so the answers will be given to her to use as she deems fit.

Results

Out of the sixty organizations identified in the sample, thirty-six executive directors responded to the survey, giving this study a 60% response rate. Answers from The Fayette Foundation's executive director are included in the sample. After averaging the results to all of the answers, some interesting aspects of board-executive director relationships in Lexington came to light. The following four statements were given the highest average rating by the sample (the average score for that statement, from a possible total of 6, is in parentheses):

- Board meetings are well-managed (i.e. there is a set agenda, time limits are observed, etc.). (5.47)
- The board's capacity to govern effectively is not impaired by conflicts between members. (5.36)
- I know which decisions can be made without board consultation and which decisions need board consultation. (5.22)
- Board members demonstrate commitment to this organization's mission and values. (5.22)

The following statements received the lowest average rankings from the sample:

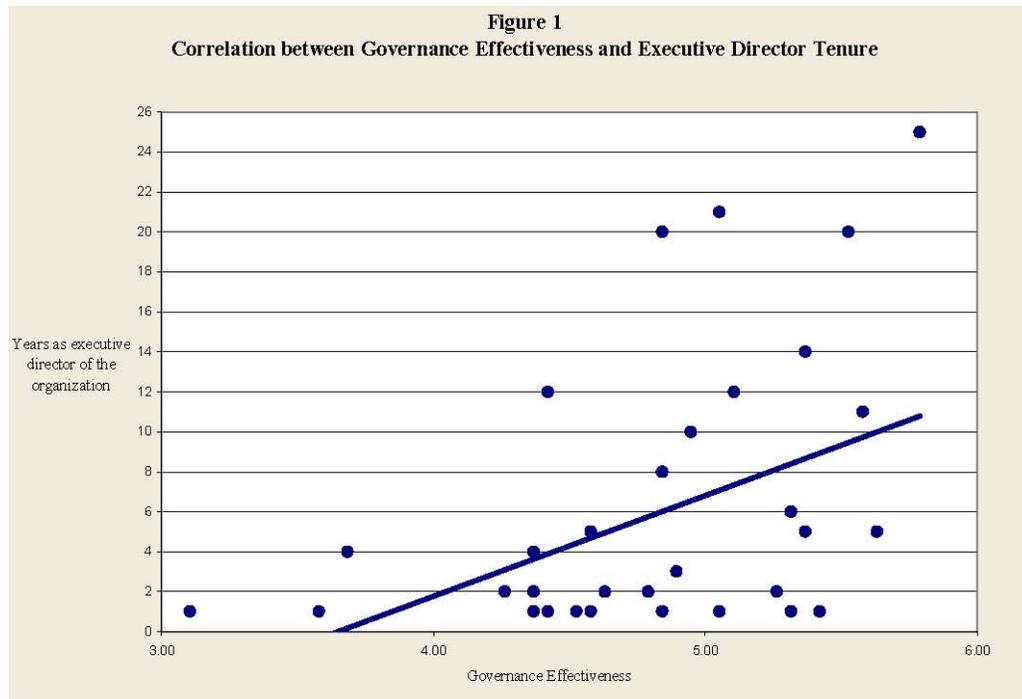
- The board is actively involved in fundraising efforts for this organization. (3.69)
- The whole board is responsible for a regular evaluation of the executive director/CEO's performance. (3.69)
- The board outlines measurable goals, objectives and expectations for my performance. (3.94)

The average of the executive directors' overall scores was 4.8. The executive director and the board of The Fayette Foundation may find it helpful to compare their scores for each of these items to gauge how they are performing compared to the perceptions of their Lexington peers. The average answer, median, high answer and low answer are included in Appendix A.

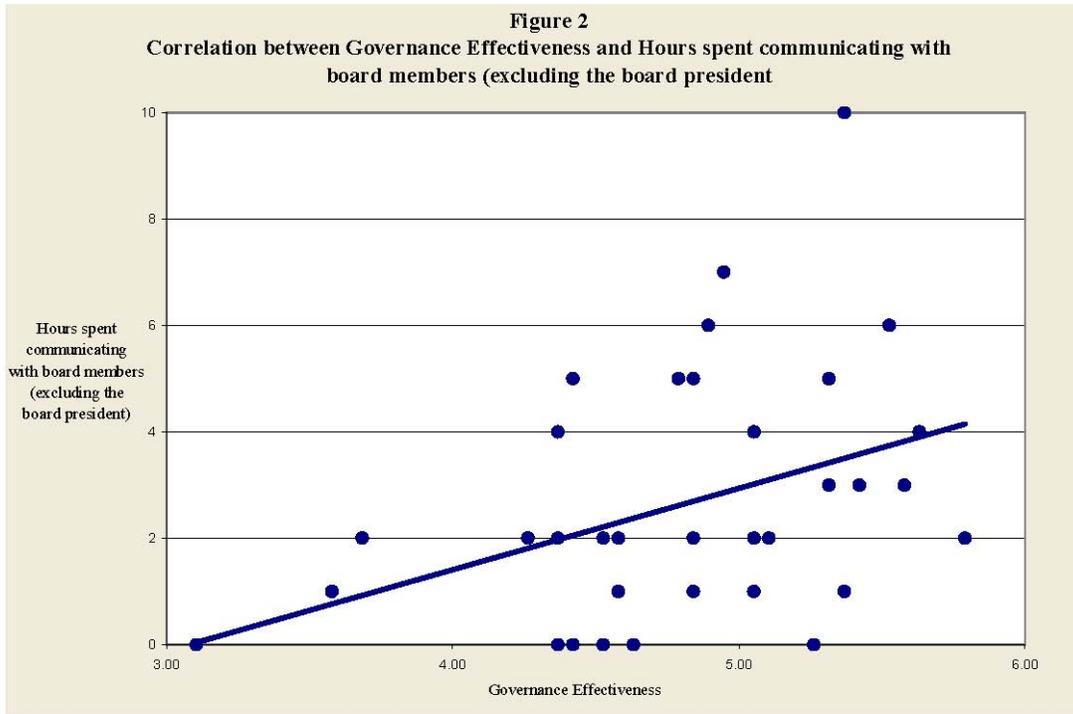
The Pearson product moment correlation coefficient was used to determine if any elements of the organization or board contributed to governance effectiveness score. The following analyses could be used to determine which elements have a positive or negative effect on the board-executive director relationship.

The overall scores on the governance effectiveness statements for each organization were compared to different elements of the organization to see if these elements had an effect on the board-executive director relationship. The most significant correlation was found to be between the number of years a person has served as executive director and the overall score on the governance effectiveness statements. The correlation coefficient for these two items was 0.44. The p-value for this analysis was 0.007, which means that this relationship is highly statistically significant since it is better than the 1% level. Figure 1 shows a scatter plot of the data for these items as well as the line that represents slope of the relationship. This information shows that

for this sample, executive director tenure is highly correlated with governance effectiveness. These findings might indicate that executive directors who do not have a good relationship with their board may not stay with the organization for a long period of time or that effective governance practices can lead to a long, effective board-executive director relationship.



The number of hours per week spent communicating with board members (excluding the board president) outside of meetings was also found to be positively correlated with governance effectiveness. The correlation coefficient between these two items was 0.39 with a p-value of 0.02, so the relationship between these two variables is statistically significant at the 5% or better level. A graphical representation of the data distribution and the slope, which charts the correlation coefficient, has been included in Figure 2. The correlation coefficient for hours per week spent communicating with the board president and governance effectiveness statements was -0.08 and the analysis showed that this relationship was not statistically significant. It was surprising to see how the measure for the board president ended up being so different than the measure for the rest of the board.



The correlation coefficient for attendance levels at board meetings and governance effectiveness was different than what was anticipated. For this sample, it turned out that these two items were negatively correlated with a correlation coefficient of -0.22. The literature on attendance at board meetings prescribes ways and reasons to maximize attendance, so the findings for this correlation coefficient are really counterintuitive. However, the p-value for this item was 0.2 so this relationship is not statistically significant. It is possible that having a smaller group at board meetings is important to holding a more effective meeting.

The correlation between board size and governance effectiveness was also calculated, but the correlation coefficient only showed a slight positive correlation of 0.09. However, this sample only included two other organizations that had more than 35 members, so it is possible that this correlation coefficient does not accurately reflect the relationship between board size and governance effectiveness. For this sample set though, there was no significant relationship found between board size and governance effectiveness. The percentage of board members who made annual financial contributions had only a slight correlation with governance effectiveness. The correlation coefficient between these two items was 0.17, which shows a slight positive correlation. However, this relationship was not found to be statistically significant.

For this survey, there were few elements of the organization or board that were significantly related to the governance effectiveness score. The executive director tenure and the hours of weekly communication with board members (excluding the board president) were found to be statistically significant at better than the 1% level and at better than the 5% level, respectively.

Variable	Correlation Coefficient with the Governance Effectiveness Score
Size of the Board	0.09
Executive Director Tenure	0.44***

Annual Monetary Contribution Levels from the Board	0.17
Attendance Rate at Board Meetings	-0.22
Hours of Weekly Communication with the Board President	-0.08
Hours of Weekly Communication with all other Board Members	0.39**

*** is statistically significant at the 1% level or better

** is statistically significant at the 5% level or better

Limitations of Study

This study is limited by the constraints of the sample in terms of geography, the types of respondents and the response rate. The survey might have produced different results if a geographically diverse sample had been used. Since the sample is limited to Lexington, Kentucky, the results cannot be used to generalize about organizations outside of the city. Also, this survey could have provided better information if the survey had also been administered to a sample of board members. Matching board member opinions to executive opinions could have provided valuable insights into the different visions and ideas of the board members and executives. In studies like these, a higher response rate is always preferable, so the results of the survey could have been more reliable if the response rate had been higher. With a longer time frame and more resources, these limitations could be addressed to in future research on this topic.

Recommendations for The Fayette Foundation

The survey results provide benchmarks for non-profit organizations in Lexington and these benchmarks are included in Appendix A. In order to complete the benchmarking exercise, the board members of The Fayette Foundation should use the nineteen Likert scale statements to rate the performance of the board. The board members can then compare their perceptions to the benchmarks provided by the executive directors in the Lexington area. The averages of the answers to the Likert scale statements should be helpful indicators of the success of the board and areas for improvement or growth. The information generated through this exercise could be a way to start planning steps to improve the board-executive director relationship.

The board can also take into consideration some of the significant correlations identified by the correlation coefficients. Since the strongest correlation was between executive director tenure and the governance effectiveness, the board might want to take note that adopting effective governance procedures might lead to a longer, better relationship with their executive director. Further review of the literature or a broader sample might help the board identify correlations that could impact their decisions and actions as a board.

Ideas for Expansion

The research methods included in this study could be further developed in numerous ways to help researchers better understand board-executive relationships in nonprofit organizations. This survey instrument could be used in future research to expand scope of the sample to get an idea of how The Fayette Foundation or another nonprofit matches up against a larger, more diverse sample of organizations. Nonprofit organizations could potentially make

use of this survey if they are trying to benchmark their board performance against other nonprofit agencies. Future studies could also expand the survey instrument to examine a broader range of nonprofit issues. An expansion of the survey topic would give researchers and nonprofit organizations a good idea of how a certain organization measures up overall compared to other nonprofits. Also, this survey can be adapted to gauge the opinions of board members to see how board members view their organization's performance compared to how executives view their organizations' performance. This type of exercise could help organizations realize communication gaps or misunderstandings between board members and executives.

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Appendix A- Key Results of the Survey

Variable	Mean	High	Low	Median
How many people are on your organization's governing board?	17.8	60	5	15
How long have you been the executive director of your organization (in years)?	5.9	25	1	2
When was your organization established?	1974	2006	1914	1979
What percentage of your board members make monetary contributions to the organization at least annually?	61.4	100	0	75
What is the average attendance rate at your regularly scheduled board meetings?	68.8	100	7	75
How many hours per week on average do you spend communicating (via phone, e-mail or in person) with your board president outside of meetings?	3.5	30	0	2
How many hours per week on average do you spend communicating (via phone, e-mail or in person) with all other board members outside of meetings?	2.6	10	0	2
This organization's orientation for board members adequately prepares them to fulfill their governance responsibilities.	4.37	6	1	5
This board is actively involved in planning the direction and priorities of the organization.	4.83	6	1	5
The whole board is responsible for a regular evaluation of the executive director/CEO's performance.	3.69	6	1	4
This organization is financially sound.	4.83	6	1	5
Board members demonstrate clear understanding of the respective roles of the board and executive director.	4.63	6	2	5
The board manages the organization's resources efficiently.	4.89	6	2	5
The board has high credibility with key stakeholders such as donors, staff and volunteers.	5.09	6	2	5
Variable	Average	High	Low	Median
Board members demonstrate commitment to this organization's mission and values.	5.23	6	4	5

Board members carry out the duties and responsibilities assigned to them in the bylaws.	4.97	6	3	5
The board's capacity to govern effectively is not impaired by conflicts between members.	5.2	6	3	5
There is a productive working relationship between the board and the Executive Director.	5.37	6	4	6
I am confident that this board would effectively manage any organizational crisis that could be reasonably anticipated.	5.17	6	2	5
Board meetings are well-managed (i.e. there is a set agenda, time limits are observed, etc.).	5.46	6	4	6
The board uses a set process for making decisions about the organization.	4.89	6	2	5
This organization has a good balance between organizational stability and innovation.	4.77	6	2	5
The board is actively involved in fundraising efforts for this organization.	3.66	6	1	4
I know which decisions can be made without board consultation and which decisions need board consultation.	5.23	6	3	5
The board outlines measurable goals, objectives and expectations for my performance.	3.91	6	1	4
Board members are provided with a statement that outlines their responsibilities to the organization.	5.09	6	2	5