Tips for Board Chairs and Other Board Leaders During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, health centers and boards have found new ways to meet challenges. Health centers have pivoted to address patient needs with expanded services like telehealth and revised in-person visits. For staff and boards, this is a time of constant change and uncertainty.

Board chairs have been challenged to provide leadership and help their boards govern effectively. This article provides tips and ideas for board chairs, board officers, and committee chairs who may hold new or more involved leadership roles as the pandemic continues.

TIPS FOR BOARD CHAIRS

The board chair leads the board, chairs board meetings, and maintains a collaborative partnership with the CEO, among other roles. To ensure the board can operate effectively during and after this pandemic, we offer several leadership considerations specific to board chairs:

- **Adapt the board chair/CEO partnership based on circumstance and need—**The board chair and CEO have a special relationship. They often set time to meet and plan meetings or touch-base on issues. During the pandemic, board chairs can continue to collaborate with the CEO. For example:

  - Proactively set a schedule to meet with the CEO. Learn how they would like to adjust this schedule as needed. Check-ins may change as "waves" of the virus affect your area and/or as other issues arise like natural disasters, legal issues, and legislative changes.

  - Let CEOs know that you are available for unscheduled calls as urgent items arise.

  - Ensure the CEO knows you, as the chair, will manage expectations and communication with the board.

- **Know it is ok to experience "leadership speed bumps" and take care of yourself—**There is no roadmap to lead a board through a pandemic! It is important for a board chair to understand that you may not know how handle every situation, and that's normal. Do your best and know that you can lean on other board officers, committee chairs, and members for support. Trust that answers are "in the room" through collective wisdom.

- **Keep virtual board meetings effective and productive—**Boards can comply with the monthly board meeting requirement for the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) Health Center Program[1] by meeting with a teleconference or videoconference. Many board chairs now have some experience with chairing virtual board meetings; below are tips chairs may wish to consider:

  - Use a consent agenda—A consent agenda includes items that rarely need discussion. This includes meeting minutes, the CEO report, and committee reports. These items can be sent to board members before the meeting so they can read them in advance and the board can vote to accept the items as a unit. If requested, specific items can be pulled out and discussed. This practice frees-up time for other, more pressing business items on the agenda. If your board agendas do not include this tool, see the **Governance Guide for Health Center Boards**, Chapter 9.[2]

---

1   See the HRSA **Health Center Program Compliance Manual, Chapter 19: Board Authority** for more on board meeting requirements (see **https://bphc.hrsa.gov/programrequirements/compliancemanual/introduction.html**). Additionally, NACHC has several articles available on **virtual board meetings** available at htt**ps://www.healthcenterinfo.org/priority-topics/covid-19/covid-19-resources-governance/**. Health centers should also check state and local laws related to virtual board meetings.

2   See NACHC's **Governance Guide for Health Center Boards**, Chapter 9 available at https://www.healthcenterinfo.org/details/?id=2302.

- Balance urgent and routine items—Board chairs have likely had to work with the CEO to balance time for urgent COVID-19 agenda items with routine board roles, and tasks that comply with HRSA Health Center Program requirements. It is important to continue this practice.

- Consider the "**three modes of governance**" to help balance routine fiduciary oversight with future-focused issues—One model frames three modes of governance: fiduciary, strategic, and generative. Most boards are comfortable in the fiduciary mode, which is mainly about oversight; the other two are:[3]

  - Strategic Mode—This mode is focused on strategy. In partnership with the CEO, it guides the organization from the current state to a future state. While a board often engages in this during strategic planning, ideas shouldn't end there. The pandemic has, for example, presented a need to re-evaluate and modify priorities and plans. Strategic questions include:

    - What role will telehealth play in the mid- to long-term future for our center?

    - Do we need to assess our sites and how we serve patients?

  - Generative Mode—This mode is when the board tackles questions related to its mission, vision, and values with an eye on the future. The board can discuss: How has the pandemic impacted the mission and vision of the center? Answers to generative questions like this can shape fiduciary oversight and health center strategy.

- **Work with the CEO and committee chairs to present clear information to the board—**During the pandemic, boards are making complex decisions. Information must be processed quickly, especially when considering health center finances. It is important for the chair to work with the CEO, committee chairs, and others to give the board information that is easy to understand for decision-making. Some board chairs and their boards use **one-page dashboards** to summarize key indicators from board and committee meetings.[4]

- **Use facilitation techniques to engage board members in virtual discussions:**

  - Leverage board leaders—Consider how to involve other board members and officers during virtual meetings. A "team" approach can create more productive discussions in the virtual setting. For example, consider assigning roles to executive committee members or officers to keep everyone engaged.

  - Encourage all voices to be heard—Some board members may not be comfortable speaking-up in virtual meetings. Look for ways to actively gain input from everyone. Some members that are comfortable in-person, may need encouragement.

  - Create a welcoming virtual space for conversation and disagreement—In-person or virtually, it is important to encourage discussion before voting on an item. This is especially true if something important will be decided. It may help to assign a board member or two to highlight the other side of an issue, or to pose questions so an issue is fully considered before the vote. Another tip is the "what if?" approach. This asks the board to challenge current thinking by flipping an issue.

  - Consider techniques used in-person that can be adapted for virtual meetings—These tools include:

    - Individual Reflection—This allows a board chair to pose a thoughtful question. Members can be given time to reflect on the question before sharing responses. Consider using a "chat" feature, "virtual whiteboard," or "virtual sticky notes" to surface ideas.

---

3   Richard Chait, William Ryan, and Barbara Taylor, Governance as Leadership: Reframing the Work of Nonprofit Boards (John Wiley & Sons, 2005). Also see Cathy Trower, *The Practitioner's Guide to Governance as Leadership: Building High-Performing Nonprofit Boards* (John Wiley & Sons, 2013).

4   See "**Models and Components of a Great Dashboard**" by Hilda H. Polanco and Sarah Walker, Nonrpofit Quarterly (2019) for more information on dashboards and various samples.

- Small Group Discussions—Some board members find it easier to discuss issues in a small group. Consider using breakout rooms found in many virtual meeting platforms to allow for this.

- The 5-Finger Straw Poll—If using video conference technology, get a quick sense of how the group feels about an issue with a virtual poll. With a finger poll: 5 fingers=love it / 4=like it a lot / 3=can live with it / 2=have a concern / 1= big concerns.

These approaches won't fit every type of decision but can be used for "big" or "difficult" issues.

- **Use or adopt a board workplan[5]—**Health center boards are responsible for a significant number of requirements. The workload can be overwhelming during the best of times. An annual board workplan can help a board ensure it fulfills its responsibilities. This planning tool is essential to stay organized during times of crisis when urgent issues can overwhelm routine needs. Please see the appendix for an example. Remember, this is a "living, breathing" document that changes as the board refines its work.

- **Stay connected with fellow board members—**It is important to recognize that board members may be feeling a spectrum of emotions during this difficult time. Board chairs can embrace opportunities to check-in with their board. Some board chairs have found that taking time to reach-out to individual members to understand their personal circumstances and learn how board service is going for them can be helpful in many ways. Check-ins serve to both support members and keep them engaged in governance. Depending on the size of the board, a board chair may want to ask other officers to help with this type of outreach. Or, assign a committee (e.g., Governance Committee/Board Development Committee) to make calls to sustain board member engagement.

- **Maintain a positive board culture during uncertainty—**Culture means "the way we do things around here." It is a mix of the values, assumptions, beliefs, language, habits, and norms of a group. Culture influences what people pay attention to, and as result, what they do. It directs behavior and sends messages about what is valued.

During "normal" times, a healthy board culture might include ensuring the board and CEO understand their roles, encouraging an open exchange of ideas and debate prior to making decisions, maintaining an inclusive environment, among other components.[6]

What happens to a board's culture when boards meet virtually and members may feel overwhelmed by volunteer, professional, and personal responsibilities? Below are some strategies for board chairs to consider.

- Preserve time for relationship building—Research demonstrates that teams are more effective when members know one another.[7] During pre-pandemic times, boards may have held informal meals or get-togethers or engaged in team building exercises to develop understanding and trust among members. Board chairs can consider alternate approaches to make deeper connections while boards meet virtually:

  - Start or end meetings with some informal time for discussion; this may include a virtual coffee break.

  - Set up small break out groups periodically for informal virtual discussions, which could be designed to help new and more seasoned members get to know one another.

  - Build in time for "mission moments" where staff leaders or board members share a connection to the mission at the start of a meeting.

---

5   See NACHC's **Governance Guide for Health Center Boards**, Chapter 10 available at **https://www.healthcenterinfo.org/details/?id=2302** for more about board workplans.

6   Adapted from Pamela Knecht, "**Effective Board Culture: The Last Frontier**," Great Boards (2015).

7   BoardSource, **Leading with Intent: 2017 National Index of Nonprofit Board Practices** available at www.boardsource.org.

One board recently shared that they host virtual center tours with virtual lunch to give board members a sense of being together and ensure challenges or opportunities are understood.

- Discuss the board's own operating practices— High-performing boards often have a "board culture statement" that defines expectations for board member conduct. The board culture statement also outlines a set of principles and values so board members can better understand and meet health center expectations. A board may wish to talk about how its norms could be adapted in the short term when boards still operate virtually (or with a hybrid model). See the appendix for a sample statement.

- **Navigate conversations about future board meetings—**When it is safe to do so in your community, your board may consider steps toward a "hybrid" approach to meetings. This will look different for different boards. Some may opt to allow members to attend in-person or virtually depending on their preference. Others may establish parameters for when the full board meets in-person, vs. virtually.

One board chair recently raised this issue to the executive committee, where they discussed how to frame the discussion. The item then appeared on the board meeting agenda, and the chair respectfully opened dialogue with the full board about what meetings could look like in the future. Board members were encouraged to be open and honest with their feedback.

That board is looking at logistics to initiate some in-person attendance at select board meetings when it is safe to do so. Logistics include proper audio and visual components, and minimum spacing standards. The board also decided that in-person attendance will be purely voluntary, with virtual access for those who prefer virtual-only. They are also committed to compliance with CDC and local health department guidelines. The board chair will ensure all members feel included and can actively participate once the hybrid meeting structure is safe to initiate.

Board Leadership Roles

Boards typically have officers who provide leadership to the board. Common board leadership roles include:

- Chair—The chair leads board meetings and provides overall leadership for the board. The chair partners with the CEO to design board meeting agendas and leads in building a strong partnership with the CEO.
- Vice Chair—The vice chair supports the chair and fills-in when the chair is unable to carry out duties.
- Secretary—The secretary ensures board actions are recorded—which may involve taking minutes or, more likely, reviewing minutes taken by staff, among other duties.
- Treasurer—The treasurer chairs the Finance Committee and provides board leadership related to financial oversight.
- Committee Chairs—Committee chairs lead various board committees (e.g., Governance, Quality, Finance). They may also be a board officer.

If the board has an Executive Committee, it is typically comprised of the board's officers. Sometimes other committee chairs are included.

Source: Adapted from NACHC's **Governance Guide for Health Center Boards** available at https://www.healthcenterinfo.org/details/?id=2302

CONSIDERATIONS FOR OTHER OFFICERS

Each board has its own officer structure. In addition to the Board Chair, many boards have a Vice Chair, Secretary, and Treasurer. Below are several considerations for other board leadership roles to provide support during the pandemic.

- Support the board chair—Serving as board chair is an extra time commitment during "normal" times and even more so during a pandemic! Talk with the chair routinely to see how you and other officers may help during meetings or in other ways.

- Support a positive board culture—Consider ways that you and other officers can lead in supporting a positive board culture during this time of physically distant meetings.

- Be prepared to ask specific questions—Know the agenda and prepare questions so you feel empowered to participate actively.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR COMMITTEE CHAIRS

Committee chairs lead various board committees (e.g., Governance, Quality, Finance) and may also be a board officer. Committee chairs can consider the following.

- Ensure virtual committee meetings are well structured and productive—Generally, a good committee meeting includes:

  - Agenda and materials provided in advance

  - The Agenda should be linked to pressing pandemic-related items, the committee's charge/charter, board priorities, and the health center's strategic plan

  - Opportunities for dialogue, discussion, and questions

  - Time to arrive at recommendations (when needed) to present to the board for consideration and approval (vote)

- Opportunity to identify when an issue requires broader board discussion

Committee chairs can also use the tips for setting virtual meeting agendas and virtual meeting facilitation techniques included in the section on "Board Chairs."

- Ensure the work of a board committee supports the board's workplan—It is more important than ever for boards to strategically focus their work. Committee chairs can work with the board chair to ensure the committee has goals for the year that have been appropriately updated during the pandemic.

- Confirm the timing of committee meetings are convenient—When possible during this pandemic, committee chairs can periodically check with committee members to ensure the meeting schedule is still convenient for them. If not, the committee chair can work with the board chair and center staff to adjust the schedule and meet the needs of committee members.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Additional resources for health center boards can be found on the **Health Center Resource Clearinghouse** (https://www.healthcenterinfo.org) under "Governance." Additional resources for boards specific to COVID-19 can be found at **https://www.healthcenterinfo.org/priority-topics/covid-19/covid-19-resources-governance/.**

This article was written by Steven Sera, Board Chair, MHC Healthcare (AZ) and Emily Heard, Director Health Center Governance, NACHC.

APPENDIX: SAMPLE BOARD CULTURE STATEMENT

The board of XYZ Health Center commits to a culture that is:

- Focused on the sustainability of the health center and its mission—The board understands its fiduciary role for the health center. It is committed to ensuring the health center fulfills its mission and remains sustainable, so ongoing services can be provided to our community. The board is committed to navigating crisis in partnership with the CEO so the center can strive to meet the needs of our community.

- Rooted in role clarity—The board understands its role to govern the health center. It hires, supports, and promotes accountability with the CEO. It is respectful of the CEO's role in managing the day-to-day operations of the health center. The board and CEO are committed to openly discussing times when roles may be blurred, or micromanagement occurs.

- Inclusive and diverse—The board's composition reflects the diversity of our community and includes members with various expertise and community connections. We value the contributions of all members and are inclusive in our approach.

- Dedicated to active participation and robust dialogue for better decision-making on behalf of the health center—The board understands the importance of full and active engagement by its members. In making decisions, the board considers the input of all members and encourages open and robust dialogue which results in better decisions for the health center. During virtual meetings, we commit to actively participating.

The board of XYZ Health Center commits to the following ground rules to support the board's culture:

- Contribute actively

- Listen attentively

- Be fully engaged during meetings

- Keep board conversations confidential

Source: Adapted from NACHC **Governance Guide for Health Center Boards** available at **https://www. healthcenterinfo.org/details/?id=2302.**

APPENDIX: SAMPLE WORKPLAN

WORK PLAN - 2020

	A Category	B Board Oversight Committee	C Name	D Review	E Last Review	F Next Review Date	G	H Jan	I Feb	J Mar	K Apr	L May	M Jun	N Jul	O Aug	P Sep	Q Oct	R Nov	S Dec
2	Board	Financial	Financal Audit	Annual	Oct-19	Oct-20											X		
3	Plans	Financial	Review Employee Retirement Plan Investment	Annual	Feb-19	Nov-20												X	
4	Policies	Clinical and Quality	Credentialing and Privileging	Annual	Jun-19	Nov-20												X	
5	Plans	Admin and Governance	Strategic Plan	Annual	Nov-19	Nov-20												X	
6	Plans	Clinical and Quality	Education Plan	Annual	Dec-19	Dec-20													X
7	Operations	Clinical and Quality	Workforce Education and Training	Annual	Jan-20	Jan-21		X											
8	Finance	Financial	990-990 EZ Return for MHC and Foundation	Annual	Feb-20	Feb-21			X										
9	Policies	Financial	Sliding Fee Scale Policy	Annual	Jul-20	Feb-21			X										
10	Policies	Financial	MHC Fee Schedule	Annual	Feb-20	Feb-21			X										
11	Compliance	Clinical and Quality	FTCA	Annual	Mar-20	Mar-21				X									
12	Operations	Admin and Governance	Dates and Hours of Operation	Annual	May-20	May-21						X							
13	Plans	Clinical and Quality	Quality & Performance Improvement Plan	Annual	May-20	May-21						X							
14	Policies	Admin and Governance	WIC Program	Triennial	May-18	May-21						X							
15	Policies	Clinical and Quality	Morbidity and Mortality Review Policy	Triennial	May-18	May-21						X							
16	Plans	Clinical and Quality	Risk Management Plan	Annual	Sep-20	Jun-21							X						
17	Plans	Clinical and Quality	Corporate Compliance Plan	Annual	Jul-20	Jun-21							X						
18	Board	Admin and Governance	Board – CEO Evaluation	Annual	Jun-20	Jun-21							X						
19	Finance	Financial	Budget	Annual	Sep-20	Jun-21							X						
20	Policy Statements	Clinical and Quality	BH Policy Statement	Triennial	Jun-18	Jun-21							X						
21	Policy Statements	Admin and Governance	Administration Policy Statement	Triennial	Jul-18	Jul-21								X					
22	Policy Statements	Clinical and Quality	Dental Policy Statement	Triennial	Jul-18	Jul-21								X					
23	Board	Admin and Governance	Confidentiality	Annual	Aug-20	Aug-21									X				
24	Board	Admin and Governance	Conflict of Interest	Annual	Aug-20	Aug-21									X				
25	Policy Statements	Clinical and Quality	Radiology Policy Statement	Triennial	Aug-18	Aug-21									X				
26	Policy Statements	Clinical and Quality	Corporate Compliance Policy Statement	Triennial	Aug-18	Aug-21									X				
27	Board	Admin and Governance	Board – Election of Officers	Annual	Sep-20	Sep-21										X			