Crafting the Board Job Description

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Board self-evaluation can only be an absurdity if the board does not know its job. In this article, I explain how to describe a job and illustrate an effective description of the board's job. Just to underscore the importance of the job description, consider that without one your next board meeting can't even have an agenda, for you'd have no idea what the board needs to do. Well, yes, there'd be one agenda item: to decide on a job description! At any rate, evaluating whether the board is getting its job done is ludicrous without having first said what that job is! So let's discuss the crafting of a job description.

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There is nothing new about describing jobs. Job descriptions are a common organizational phenomenon. By tradition, we are accustomed to describing what a person does in a job. Indeed, if we look at a typical job description, we're likely to find a listing of job activities: type letters, review reports, administer a program, conduct training, mow lawn, wash dishes. But more sophisticated managers know that the most useful job descriptions focus not on activities but rather on the outcomes of those activities.

Knowing what to do in a job and continually improving the ability to do those things—what is often called *process improvement*—is important. But the worth of a better process lies in its contribution to getting a job done. Even monumental progress in methods is wasted if it is not aimed toward the appropriate job outputs.

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Focusing on Outputs

By job outputs I mean the conditions or states that will be realized if the job is successfully accomplished. What will be the case in one or another domain of organizational life? For example, a therapist's job exists not to do therapy but to help dysfunctional clients become functional. A program evaluator's job does not exist to do evaluation studies but to give program managers accurate data about program effectiveness.

In other words, no job exists to *do* anything. A job exists for the *result of the doing.* It exists to make a difference in something besides itself. Clarity about the difference to be made is the essence of a powerful job description. Consequently, a far more robust description of a job is in terms of outputs rather than activities. Activities, conduct, and process are not unimportant, but their importance is largely a function of whether the job outputs are achieved. If we focus on describing the needed outputs first, appropriate activities can be designed and improvements in process pursued. However, we focus first on the process, leaving outputs unstated, we can come to treat the process as the output itself: Methods become more important than results.

Unfortunately, however, almost all published definitions of the board's job are statements of activities or methods: approve budgets, make policy, oversee finances, participate in discussion, hire the CEO, read monitoring reports, listen to input, review plans, read the mailings, learn to read financial statements, become better communicators, attend meetings, keep minutes, call on donors, and so on ad infinitum. It is not that these oft-prescribed engagements are wrong, *but using activities as the beginning point for describing the board's job actually sabotages board leadership.* They are not results in themselves but activities or processes that ostensibly serve some intended results. It is possible for boards to carry out all the activities prescribed by the conventional wisdom and still fail to fulfill a useful organizational role. Hence, a major aspect of board self-evaluation is, first, the careful specification—in outcome terms—of just what the board's job *is!*

← FAQ

What is wrong with the traditional board member job descriptions?

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Defining Achievement

To define achievement, we must determine just what the board is to accomplish. Exactly what is the "value added" for which the board exists in the first place? What does the board contribute to the organization that sets it apart from the CEO and from staff members? It does no good for the board to be good at what it does, if what it does doesn't need to be done. Clear definition of just what the board is to achieve is paramount. The board's expression of mission is an example of such thinking—or should be. In this article, however, the subject is not the mission of the organization but the mission of the board's job. For example, except in very small organizations, the board's direct job is not the accomplishment of mission but *the statement of mission* in a clear and compelling way.

The deliberation that generates a board job description is soul searching, lengthy, and utterly individual. The discussion is never alike for any two boards, even though the resulting policy language may be similar. It's important to realize that with this discussion—where policy describing the board job is generated—the board takes a substantial step in establishing a system of self-evaluation, for the policy establishes the principal criteria by which that evaluation will take place. The very act of writing these policies, most boards discover, teaches them more about why they exist than they have ever known before. Before a board even begins its first formal self-evaluation, then, it already has a clearer sense of what it needs to achieve, simply because it has gone through the process of spelling out its job policy.

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The boxed text depicts a finished policy from the board of the United States Cycling Federation (USCF), a U.S. Olympics Committee-affiliated membership organization located in Colorado Springs. I use this policy here to point out features in the USCF board job description and show how these ultimately relate to the ongoing process of board self-evaluation. Remember that this policy describes the board's job, not the organization's job. Of all the "gifts" that it takes to make an organization work, which ones does the board contribute? That is, in addition to staff contributions, what does the board bring to the party? Notice the disconcerting lack of verbs in most segments of the USCF policy. This unfamiliar style is simply an instance of bending over backward to be sure that the outcome condition is highlighted, not the actions required to produce it. That is, the job is not to advocate, encourage, or work toward any of the outcomes; the job is that the outcomes exist. So the USCF board is avoiding language that could let it off the hook, even at the expense of slightly curious wording.

Policy Type: Governance Process
Policy Title: Board Job Description

The job of the board is to make contributions that lead USCF toward the desired performance and assure that it occurs.

The obligations of the board shall be

I. The link between USCF and its membership.

II. Written governing policies that, at the broadest level, address

  A. Ends: products of the federation, impacts, benefits, outcomes. What good will the federation do for whose needs and at what cost?

  B. Executive limitations: prudence and ethics boundaries for executive authority, activity, and decisions.

  C. Governance process: specifications of how the board conceives, carries out, and monitors its task.

  D. Board-executive director relationship: how power is delegated and its proper use monitored.

III. The assurance of executive director performance.

The USCF board determined that the board's job purpose, most broadly stated (and, therefore, in the preamble), is whatever "contributions . . . lead . . . toward the desired (organizational) performance and ensure" that performance. While the preamble only gives a broad-brush explication of the job outputs of the board, the finer points 1 to 3 make the outputs far clearer.

1. The first point obligates the board to produce a link between the thousands of members of USCF and the operating organization. This board recognizes that it is the "bridge" between those who own USCF (its members) and the organization that they own. In the rush of organizational details, it is easy for a board to forget its pivotal role with regard to ownership linkage.

For another board, this linkage may not be with a membership per se, but with some ownership group. For example, a city council's job description under Policy Governance obligates the council to produce a linkage between city citizens and the machinery of city government. A church board would form the link between the congregation and the workings of the church organization.

Annually, the board might further define what level of thoroughness or inclusiveness is to be achieved in this linkage. That is, the board might be more definitive about the nature of that linkage. In some year to come, for example, the USCF board might expand the wording to say that linkage will mean that 20 percent of the membership will participate in focus groups or surveys about what they think their federation should produce for them. In the service of this linkage the board will devise activities, such as meeting with regional representatives, having more membership access to board members during annual conventions, or other methods of producing a more effective linkage.

It is important to note that the linkage here is with *owners*, not customers. For membership associations and city councils, owners and customers are largely the same people, so opportunities for confusion are legion. From owners, an organization learns what kind of organization it is to be, particularly what difference it will make (an ends question). From customers, the organization discovers how well it is providing that which it has decided to provide. In most cases, feedback deteriorates—as is common for city councils—into a forum for disgruntled customers. The latter is fine for monitoring staff performance but helps little in doing the board's work of deciding what the ends should be.

This policy recognizes that the integrity, completeness, unbiasedness, and timeliness of the connection between members and the organization is a board product, for which only the board is accountable. The carrying out of activities is not what is evaluated; the intended outcome (quality of linkage) is evaluated. Evaluation might take any number of forms. For example, the board can engage in a bit of soul searching about the extent of its linkage or, better still, it can ask the members.

2. The USCF board's second point states that the board policies themselves are an important job contribution of the board. The policies must cover the four categories listed. This emphasis on policymaking in the list of board products, like the emphasis on ownership linkage, reflects a key element in my approach to board leadership. For the staff to manage well, the board must govern well, and governing well involves converting the sundry opinions and values of individual board members into a consistent set of explicit values and positions. Incidentally, financial, program, and personnel matters are not on the USCF list, for they are simply among the management responsibilities that these policies control.

Further, if the board puts its enunciations into the categories of the Policy Governance model, it not only will create explicit board values and opinions but also will do so in a format that best enables management to proceed well. This kind of policymaking is not the ethereal sort that leads many people to consider policies to be removed from the real world—that is, they don't make much difference. But it is just as important to note that this kind of policymaking is not the detailed sort that ties an organization up in bureaucratic knots.

The upshot is that a board that adopts this approach will naturally spend most of its time creating, analyzing, and revising policy—activities that contribute to continual self-evaluation and lie at the core of board leadership. Again, it is not the spending of time that is evaluated but whether board policies are indeed complete.

3. USCF's third point connects board performance to CEO performance. If the CEO does not perform acceptably (as measured against the policies created in 2A and 2B), the board is therefore not performing acceptably. The board's job description not only pays homage to the board's accountability for staff effectiveness but also clearly states that if the CEO doesn't get the job done, the board cannot score well in subsequent evaluation of its own achievement.

Point 3 serves a role that some management writers have referred to as a "linking pin" that renders the performance in a superior job dependent on the performance of a subordinate job. If the chief executive—which is to say, the entire staff organization—does not perform well and continues not to perform well, the board itself is culpable. So while USCF board job product number 3 requires rigorous monitoring of organizational performance, the activity of monitoring does not itself fulfill the board's job responsibility. No, the self-evaluative question, as with each of the foregoing job products, is not whether the board carried out *activities* intended to produce the products but whether in fact the products are produced. In this case, the board will ask itself whether an acceptable level of "assurance" of executive performance exists.

Having a board job description such as USCF's in place establishes the board's expectations with respect to its actual contributions to the organization. With clarity about job outputs, every board action and every improvement can and must be justified and assessed with respect to the board's ability to perform with greater integrity on these outputs. Every part of an agenda, for example, would be in the service of some part of the intended job outputs. Putting such output job expectations in place, then, not only forms the board's central guide to all further job activities but also creates the most important part of the foundation for self-evaluation.

While it is critical for a board to determine the outputs toward which its work will be aimed, as this article has pointed out, still it cannot omit a careful crafting of its *job process,* the well-disciplined conduct required to get the job done. Discipline in governance is the subject of the next article, "Planning the Board's Conduct."