



TRANSFORMING GOVERNANCE

Board Guidelines for a Time of Crisis

The board's role during the COVID-19 pandemic

BY KARMA H. BASS AND BRAD D. CLARKE

VIEWPOINT

As health care organizations step up to the challenge of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the need for a governing board to effectively fulfill its role as overseer of the organization has never been more critical. But determining specifically what board members should and should not be doing during a time of crisis can be difficult. The following guidelines identify actions and behaviors your governing board members should undertake—or avoid—during the pandemic.

1. **Govern, don't manage.** As tempting as it may be to be active in managing the crisis, board members must remember their roles as overseers, not operators. Getting involved in operations—e.g., requesting involvement in a crisis management meeting or asking for too much information from a CEO—only adds to the executive leadership's burden and runs the risk of crossing the line between governance and management.
2. **Trust the executive team.** Although a first inclination may be to contact the CEO frequently, the board must trust that the executive team and staff are taking appropriate steps to manage the crisis and will reach out to the board when the team requires oversight involvement.
3. **Stay connected.** The board chair can play an essential role in staying connected with the CEO and conveying information to other board members. The chair and CEO should establish basic ground rules for communication and designate a preferred method for receiving and sending urgent communication. For example, the CEO and the board chair may agree that communication that is urgent and requires a response will be delivered via

text, while communication that is more informational and does not require a response or an immediate response will be delivered via email. The CEO and board chair also should agree on the cadence of regular communication—e.g., weekly, every other week—between the CEO and the board during the crisis. For some boards, a weekly email update from the CEO throughout the crisis strikes the right balance.

4. **Do not act as a public spokesperson.** Board members are not hospital spokespersons and should decline national and local requests for comment on a hospital's practices, challenges or crisis management updates. Requests should instead be directed to the hospital's media relations, public relations or communications department, as appropriate. Concerns or complaints about a hospital service should be directed to a patient advocacy department.
5. **Be respectful of staff time.** Hospital support staff are trained to respond to requests by the board promptly and efficiently. The board should minimize work that a staff may need to do to prepare for a board meeting and also delay asking questions that are neither urgent nor related to the crisis to another time.
6. **Expedite clinician privileging.** In some areas, the pandemic is causing a surge of patients, overburdening the medical staff. Board members should be willing to approve an expedited privileging process to support onboarding of community physicians who are not on staff at the facility.
7. **Advocate.** Advocacy is a main responsibility of the board and even more important in times of crisis, as health care organizations may require additional funds to obtain resources and maintain operations. Board members should consider sending requests for emergency fund relief to their elected officials.
8. **Promote the use of telemedicine/virtual care.** While interacting with family, friends and those in the community, board members should encourage the use of virtual care, as available, to help relieve the impact on emergency rooms. The board should receive appropriate links explaining the steps for a virtual provider visit, for example, so they can pass this information along to others.
9. **Leverage community resources.** Board members should use their local relationships to obtain access to and donations of resources urgently needed to provide care, such as protective masks, tents for setting up services outside facilities, or childcare for hospital staff who are putting in extra hours.
10. **Be aware of community needs.** If a board member learns of a specific community need, the member can deliver that message to a hospital staff member, such as the board liaison, who then will deliver the request to the appropriate department representative.
11. **Lead by example.** Most board members are high-profile community members who can act as role models for appropriate behavior during a crisis. For instance, by practicing social distancing during the pandemic, board members can foster behavior that will greatly serve their communities.
12. **Solicit contributions.** The number of community members requiring financial assistance during the pandemic may quickly accelerate. Board members can leverage their connections to ask for funds to help the organization's community assistance emergency funds.
13. **Do not leverage the board role for preferential treatment.** As members of the community who use health care services and have family and friends who do so, board members face the temptation to use their roles to obtain preferential treatment. Board members must respect the organization's operational processes for fair treatment of all community members. They also must remember that hospital staff are still required to adhere to strict patient confidentiality and information protocols during the pandemic.

14. **Acknowledge leadership and caregivers.** Hospital executives, providers and other staff are putting their lives in danger to manage the crisis and care for others. Something simple like a formal thank-you letter from the board acknowledging the dedication of leadership and employees can help boost strength and commitment.

Overall, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the board should refrain from overwhelming leadership and staff with questions and overstepping into a management role. In times of crisis, the main role of the board is to be supportive of the organization's efforts and ready to help when asked.

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