Working With Your Park Board

The presentation covered the basics of park boards and highlighted separating the professional and the personal. Key points included:

- Brainstorming about the positive and negative aspects of parks.
- Knowing the rules and regulations of the Park Board.
- Help the Board focus on the big picture, rather than being caught up on small details.
- Be sure to mention accomplishments and do not dwell on the failures.
- Be clear in communication with members and residents.
- Respect members despite differences.
- Inform and educate the members.
- Do not be afraid of discussing the reality.
BEST PRACTICS TO ACHIEVE SUCCESS WITH YOUR BOARD

1. Boards – know their origin and authority.
   - Policy making.
   - Advisory board.

2. They can do things you cannot.

3. Best practices for success:
   - Follow the group’s charter and by-laws.
   - Orient new members – remember you don’t get a degree in being a board member.
   - They are representative of the community.
   - No surprises.

   Know what makes each member “tick.” Where is their passion?

Key is to help the board to focus on the “big picture” (i.e. tours, meetings in a variety of your facilities and parks, bring in staff to provide orientations to the diverse opportunities in the system). Avoid inviting them to “micro-manage.”

During meetings, reserve a time for “good things” at the beginning of the meetings.

Don’t get caught up taking sides. Keep focused on good, well documented professional data and recommendations that are policy and mission based.

Write proposals and reports clearly so they are easily understood. Remember, your board is diverse in their experience with data, etc. Use credible data.

Share historical rationale as to current policy and practice.

Be clear that actions taken are within the scope of the board.

Take action in a resolution format to insure the actions are clear and effective records can be retained.
Avoid last minute action with memos presented the day of the meeting.

Forward electronic reports, news articles and updates between meetings. It helps to inform, connect and space out information.

Enable the board to be in the lead for policy recommendations to the parent elected body. They can say and do what you cannot.

Enable the board to take the lead in advocating for referendums, etc., as you cannot as staff.

Structure reports in a brief manner to include:

- Exactly what action is required in the opening paragraph.
- Clear background information.
- Options considered with pros and cons (if applicable).
- Benchmark and/or market analyses (i.e. what other comparable agencies are doing).
- A clear recommendation(s).
- Action delineated in an attached resolution.
- An attached appendix, if necessary, but all key points should be included in the memo.

Don’t let the process become the issue.

As the professional staff, your focus is to recommend and focus on “doing the right thing,” that fits the organization’s mission and is “doing right by the people.”
A Board Member's Toolkit

No volunteer director starts out determined to garner the title of "most difficult board member ever." However, some who miss the orientation for new directors, never read any briefing materials, and come with a lot of misconceptions easily slide into that category. Here are some points to consider when you become a top leader.

By Wilford A. Butler, CAE
1. Always show up. It was time for the board meeting, and the chief elected leader was missing. As the vice chair began the agenda, the telephone rang—it was the chief elected leader calling to find out the meeting location. When told it was on the 19th floor, he responded, "It's too high." Apparently he was afraid of heights, or at least offered that excuse for missing the meeting.

The first rule of volunteering is that you must show up. Top leaders and directors cannot delegate active attendance and participation in meetings. To do so shortchanges the people who selected you as well as exposes you to risk. As one top leader says, "Come early and stay a few minutes after" and you will learn much.

2. What's your leadership legacy? As you begin your responsibilities, think about the leadership legacy that you will pass on to the next organization leaders. How do you want to be remembered? Avoid the temptation of endless service. There is a reason why bylaws provide for defined terms of offices, and it makes no sense to volunteer once you have lost enthusiasm for the tasks. Opt for a constructive legacy of leadership, identifying and helping to recruit future leaders.

In one association, the same volunteer chaired the legislative committee for 23 years. During the first years, the chair was effective, but as time went by, enthusiasm and participation by other volunteers dwindled to nothing. That person left a legacy of irresponsible, selfish behavior and loss of progress and reputation for the association.

3. Get an early start on board materials. U.S. State Department research indicates that the worst time to master board briefing materials is in transit to the meeting. One executive placed $20 bills in the third and final sections of the new strategic long-range plan, and then sent it out to the governing board. Only 3 of 12 leaders found the money. Read ahead, make notes of questions, and call to discuss before the meeting. You will save time and the embarrassment of asking time-consuming, obvious questions at the meetings.

4. Look forward, not back. Spend little time enthusing about the past. The best leaders always look to the future. Take the wider perspective and think about what is best for the organization and all of the members, not just those in a single region or your special interests. Spend at least part of every meeting focusing on how the industry or profession is changing, what it will be three to five years from now, and how to make the organization indispensable.

5. Continually review mission, vision, and plan. The best mission and vision statements are brief and resonate with members. Even the public can understand what the organization seeks to accomplish. If the mission, vision, and strategic plan are not up to date, make this an early priority. Substitute the discipline of planning for the whims of the day. Of course, the agenda and the focus should relate to the major initiatives of the strategic plan. One former director says, "If you haven't given the strategic plan in board orientation, then it is a sure bet that it isn't up to date, and that the board doesn't remember it." How can you be inspired to relate to the mission if it can't be remembered?

6. Strategic thinking is a special responsibility. One extremely intelligent chief elected leader worked closely with the chief staff executive to convene a series of industry summits that brought together the experts in the field to do strategic thinking about tomorrow. The chair's mantra was, "If we always do what we always have done, we'll get just that...diminishing returns." The experts came, at their own expense, delighted to be invited to share their insights.

7. Talk to new members. For the price of doughnuts and coffee, you will get new members who are passionate about sharing their perceptions about the organization. Perceptions are key in determining whether a member decides to get involved and continue.

Members were thrilled to be invited to sit down with the chief elected leader and the chief staff executive of one organization, who took notes and followed up on their concerns. Word of the program swept through the profession, and the powerful message was, "We have some people at the top who are interested and who care and want to make the association better."

8. Bring in a member—it sets the needed example. The chair of a large, notable professional group believed that it was work on the association membership committee and the satisfaction of bringing in new members that started the trip to the top volunteer spot. Not surprisingly, the membership department observed an immediate increase in volunteer interest. There's just no excuse for an alert director or officer who can't bring one new high-quality member each year to the governing board.

9. Have your calendar with you. Know that you will be asked to commit to participate in association activities and that you will need to have your calendar and note-taking equipment with you at all times during your term. When people invite you to attend functions, check with staff to make sure that there aren't six directors at one event and none at two others. People will ask you to make many decisions and commitments that should be deferred until you check on facts, policies, and history. Make no promises you can't keep, and when you promise to follow up, do so.

10. Understand the plan for crises. All good organizations have designated spokespeople and plans for dealing with crises and emergency situations. Journalists usually call when they are on deadline. Refer them to the informed people rather than providing incorrect or potentially damaging
responses. Keep the contact numbers of spokespersons near your office, home, and cell phones so that you can provide the necessary resources.

14. Ask for staff research help early. Two days before the board meeting is not the time to ask staff for major research in order to complete a report. Know that as the date for the board meeting nears, there are numerous demands on staff time and resources to get the meeting under way. Ask for help the week after the board meeting, and be specific about what you want. If the task is a major one, perhaps it will need to be divided into several pieces. Everyone thinks that his or her project is the highest priority, but everything cannot be priority number one. If it is going to cost money, know where the funds will come from in order to collect the information you need.

15. Rapid turnover of executives costs time and money. One association's board turned over chief executives so often that it acquired the reputation of being into "disposable" executives. Predictably, the day came when the best candidates lost interest. The board had acquired a reputation for being unable to agree. Each time a new chief staff executive arrived, the association lost momentum and direction while the new executive learned how to negotiate the land mines of disagreement.

16. Deal with the name game now. Few things are as emotional as a name change. One large group clung to an outdated name years after it had lost effectiveness. Finally, after 10 consecutive years of lower membership, retention problems, and much meeting controversy, a silent majority - agreed to change the name and broaden appeal. One board leader observed, "We really defined the organization for a decade arguing about this one issue, and lost lots of credibility and ground in the process."

17. Tune in to leading indicators. When asked about the business outlook for the next year, elected leaders in one trade association were incredibly optimistic. The economic indicators revealed that the reverse trends were likely. No organization operates in a vacuum untouched by larger trends. To serve well, top leaders need to recognize key indicators and understand how they affect the group and its members.

18. Grow room for members. Growth in membership in one organization that always met at the same resort created a no-win situation. Longtime members reserved their rooms a year ahead of time, requiring newer members to make do in lesser lodgings. Firm mergers, bankruptcy, or funerals offered the only options for better rooms.

19. Agree on what constitutes success. Be clear about how you like to work with staff and what constitutes success. Don't make staff guess your expectations and leave that personal project in the file of good intentions. How many organizations have invested in the pet project of a new chief elected leader or board, only to have that initiative scrapped at term's end? One executive observed of an inscrutable board, "Every time we agree on success, they move the goalposts."

20. Achievement flows from the team at the top. Is the relationship between the chief elected leader and chief staff executive one of the team of two, a partnership, or the odd couple? Make time for regular communication and don't offer criticisms in public. Know that the relationship at the top sets the tone for other top leaders. Modeling a supportive, cooperative, positive relationship sends waves of encouragement to both volunteers and staff.

21. Resist the temptation to micromanage. If you catch yourself spending a lot of time managing anything that can be handled by staff, you are on
the way to slowing progress and initiative. Know that your ideas and vision of a project will be transformed in the hands of other staff and volunteers and that they can't be expected to make an exact copy of something. Pity the chief, elected leader who thought it was necessary to personally write every word in the organization’s annual report.

22. **Bottom line: Money really matters.** Reserve funds are accumulated for a real rainy day, not an annual sprinkle or two. There is an expectation that the organization’s budget will be balanced, that less effective programs and services will be rejuvenated or phased out, and that new projects will fall within the scope of the mission, vision, and strategic plan. Top elected leaders are encouraged to think about replacing financial resources that are expended on their watch.

23. **Be mindful of other people’s time as well as your own.** Understand time, dates, and deadlines. There is a reason why board agenda items are prepared in advance, why articles and reports are due to fit into a publication schedule, and why meetings should begin and end on time. If you must plan to arrive early in order to be on time, do so. Don’t keep people guessing about your participation.

One chief elected leader never shared the content of the annual meeting report in advance. There was no way that board members or staff could prepare for the questions that inevitably followed. It was plain that this top leader didn’t care what anyone else thought or did.

24. **Ask for great volunteers.** Think about the identification and development of future leaders. Most leaders serve because others personally took the time to invite them to be volunteer leaders. A 1999 study of volunteers by Independent Sector, Washington, D.C., reports that 89 percent of the people who were asked took on volunteer assignments, while 22.3 percent gravitated to volunteering without a specific invitation.

25. **Effect a wonderful transition.** At the end of your term, decide that a positive and cooperative attitude will do much to advance the organization, and that support for the incoming chief elected leader, the board, committees, and staff are an essential part of doing a superior job. Praise and give support to the association, leadership, and staff—they deserve your continuing commitment.

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AGENDA

Working with Your Board

5 mins.  1. Introduction

5 mins.  2. Boards and Commissions – Policy vs. Advisory
        ▪ Enabling legislation and their defined charge.

10 mins. 4. Best Practice Survey Results

15 mins. 5. My Best Practices

30 mins. 3. Best Practices for Success
        ▪ Who has them and what good are they?
        ▪ What are yours?
          ➢ Small groups –pick top 3 (15 minutes)
          ➢ Report out (5 minutes)

10 mins. 6. Discussion
CARVERGUIDE

YOUR ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES AS A BOARD MEMBER

John Carver and Miriam Mayhew Carver
Board members can be successful strategic leaders if they nurture their sense of group responsibility. All members must participate in the discipline and productivity of the group. All members must be willing to challenge and urge each other on to big dreams, lucid values, and fidelity to their trusteeship. All members must cherish diversity in viewpoints as well as the challenge of reaching an unambiguous, single board position derived from that diversity. All members must strive for accountability in the board’s job, confident that if quality dwells in the boardroom, the rest of the organization will take care of itself.

Each board member carries important individual responsibilities in this pursuit of quality. These responsibilities are often written as a job description for board members. In this CarverGuide, we will describe the essentials of the board member’s job, as determined by the Policy Governance model. But first, to make the job fully understandable, we must examine the board’s governance process.

The Governance Process

Board members, not staff, are morally trustees for the ownership and, consequently, must bear initial responsibility for the integrity of governance. A board’s relationship to those who, in a moral if not legal sense, own the organization is its primary relationship—far outweighing the board’s relationship to its CEO and staff. It is out of the board’s obligation to act on behalf of this larger group that the board’s job springs.
Hence, the point of departure for defining the board’s job is in terms of making sure something happens on behalf of the ownership, not in terms of what the board does about internal organizational matters. For example, the board does not exist to help the staff, but to stand in for the owners. The board does not exist to supply auxiliary skills to the staff.

Board members can help staff, of course, but it is crucial to remember that such help is not why the board exists; that is, helping staff is not the purpose of governance. Such help to staff should be by board members as individual volunteers in order to make use of board members’ valuable aid without compromising the integrity of governance.

The board’s proper exercise of owners’ authority is the beginning of accountability. The board cannot escape its personal responsibility for its own development, its own job design, its own discipline, and its own performance. Primary responsibility for board development does not rest in the chief executive, staff, funding bodies, or government.

It is inviting to rely on the chief executive to provide motivation for a board. This scenario frequently extends further than the provision of an occasional motivation “fix.” It often extends as far as spoon-feeding. No matter how well the executive tells the board what to do and when to do it, governance cannot be excellent under these conditions. Going through the motions, even the “right” motions, is fake leadership that transforms a chief executive into a baby-sitter. Only a deluded board waits for its CEO to make it a good board.

As a board sets out to fulfill its trusteeship, its most immediate responsibility is to deal with the implications of being a group. Indeed, this hurdle can easily keep a board from attending to other responsibilities. Boards are fraught with extensive interpersonal dynamics as is any other group of human beings. We want to persuade the reader that taking time to design a sound governance process, before the process becomes personalized, is the greatest safeguard against the debilitating effects of unfortunate interpersonal dynamics. A sound design of the board’s job will assure good governance even more than picking board members who are perfectly intelligent, communicative, assertive, and mentally healthy! In other words, you cannot overcome bad design with good people.

Carefully designing areas of board job performance will profoundly channel the interpersonal process of a board. For example, job design influences the types of conflict that will be experienced and whether members will follow a commonly proclaimed discipline or their individual disciplines. Diversity is directed toward some areas and muted or eliminated in others. Clarifying tasks and off-limits topics helps to depersonalize subsequent struggles when different individuals have opposing views about the appropriateness of an issue for board discussion.

A sound, codified governance process can ameliorate jockeying for power, control of the group through negativism, and diversion of the board into unrelated topics. One way in which the board participates in good process is by establishing explicit policies concerning the topic in the governance process category. The chairperson can then preserve the process by referring to board policy, which is easier and more legitimate than invoking disciplinary measures on the basis of his or her individual sense of what should be. Board members expect too much of the chairperson, for example, when they ask him or her to save the board from being held hostage by its most controlling member. Each member has the right to want to run things or never to budge. But, as a body, the board does not have the right to allow these individual proclivities to destroy the process.

Though the chairperson bears particular responsibility with respect to governance process, the entire board cannot avoid its share of responsibility. In other words, the existence of a chairperson does not relieve other board members from contributing to the integrity of the process. If the board as a whole does not accept responsibility for the governance process, the best the chairperson can achieve is superficial discipline. Moreover, board discipline achieved by virtue of the chairperson alone can easily be lost when the office turns over.
Construction of governance process policies begins with consideration of the board's overall reason for existence, because the ultimate test of process is whether this reason is fulfilled. So the board’s “megaprocess” is the bridge that translates between those to whom the board is accountable and those who are accountable to the board.

Developing an effective governance process begins with clarification of the specific contributions of this bridge between owners and producers. Before we can intelligently design a governance process, we must be sure of what the board exists to accomplish: “form follows function.” Appropriate practices are determined on the basis of the accomplishments expected. The board job description is thus the central factor in the governance process.

The Basic Board Job Description

Unfortunately, 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. 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.

Policy Governance requires the board’s job, just like the CEO’s job, to be described by its “values added,” or, if you will, job products, rather than by its types of busy-ness. How is the organization different because this job exists? What does this job contribute? In describing job contributions, we speak of job “products” simply to keep before us at all times the output aspect of work rather than the activity aspect.

A governing board can make any number of contributions to its organization. But the choice of those board outputs should not be merely a laundry list of board member interests. Nor will responsible board leadership be achieved by accepting by rote the usual list of board activities handed down by traditional practice. We must craft a more effective blueprint than either chance or conventional wisdom can give us. Let us introduce our own definitions of responsibility and accountability in order to address this need for a blueprint.

No one argues against individuals taking responsibility for their individual actions. José is responsible for his contributions to the organization. Sally is responsible for hers, and so on. But suppose José and Sally work under the supervision of Maria. Maria, just like any other individual, is responsible for her contributions to the organization. Yet Maria is responsible for the output of José and Sally as well as her own. That extra burden went along with Maria’s accepting the job of supervisor.

Let’s say that Maria and some others at her level report directly to the CEO, Jill. Jill is responsible for her own contributions to the total just like everyone else. Yet Jill is also responsible for the output of the entire organization of workers. At each level of organization, a worker bears what we might call simple responsibility for his or her own behavior but also bears a cumulative responsibility for all workers under his or her purview. At each level of management, the manager needs to be very aware of his or her cumulative responsibility—for that is the total output that his or her supervisor is looking at. In other words, a manager is responsible for producing something himself or herself, but the greater importance is the production of the entire organization part over which he or she has been given authority.

We will refer to the simple, direct responsibility for one’s own work as “responsibility.” We will refer to the bottom-up accumulation of responsibility for others’ work together with one’s own as “accountability.” We realize that other definitions can be given to these words, but whatever words are used, we definitely need to distinguish between these two concepts.

In this way, it can be seen that the board has “accountability” for the entire organizational behavior—often referred to in normal discourse as “ultimate accountability.” But the board’s own job
within that undoably large challenge—its “responsibility”—must be designed very carefully. The aim is to construe the board's responsibility (its job description) so that if it is carried out acceptably, the board's accountability is fulfilled.

Another way of stating this is that most of what a board is accountable for is out of reach, too complex and expansive for the board to touch directly. Most organizational decisions, for example, are “hands-off” matter for the board by necessity even if not by choice. But the responsibility of the board is the doable, “hands-on” piece of the total from which we must design board meetings, seek “matches” and skills in recruiting new members, and thus differentiate the board’s job from everyone else’s.

Whatever a board delegates to its CEO, then, is removed from the board's own responsibility, though clearly it remains accountable for it. By sheer necessity, most decisions in an organization are delegated away from the board. Indeed, because the board’s leadership is so critical, it is best to delegate everything that can be delegated in order not to dilute the few unique contributions that can be made only by the board. Only three products cannot be delegated by a board. These form an irreducible trio applicable to all governing bodies, a short list but constructed so that the board’s accountability for the total is not circumvented in the name of simplicity.

If accomplished, these direct job responsibilities of the board ensure the board’s overall accountability as well. Thus, differentiating between the “hands-on” and “hands-off” aspects of the board’s obligation saves the board from acting as if everything is its job. Let me summarize the job products of the board:

1. The board’s first direct product is the organization’s linkage to the ownership. The board acts in trusteeship for “ownership” and serves as the legitimizing connection between this base and the organization.

2. The board’s second direct product is explicit governing policies. The board has the obligation to fulfill fiduciary responsibility, guard against undue risk, determine program priorities, and generally direct organization activity. A board can be accountable yet not directly responsible for these obligations by setting the policies that will guide them. The values and perspectives of the whole organization can be encompassed by the board’s explicit enunciation of broad policies if those policies follow a few simple principles.

3. The board’s third direct product is assurance of executive performance. The board is obliged to ensure that the staff faithfully serves the board’s policies. If the CEO continually fails to fulfill these explicit expectations, the board is itself culpable. The board has no choice but to take the steps necessary to remedy the situation. Although the board is not responsible for the performance of staff, it must ensure that staff (as a whole, not individually) meet the criteria the board has set. In this way, its accountability for that performance is fulfilled.

These three undelegable job contributions are the unique responsibilities of a governing board—unique because only the governing body can contribute these products. The board may add other products to this list, but it cannot shorten it and still responsibly govern.

You will notice that the board’s job outputs are always means as opposed to ends. (Ends, remember, are direct statements of what consumer results are to be achieved, for which consumer groupings, and at what worth.) This should not be surprising inasmuch as the organization does not exist to have good governance. Good governance exists to describe and assure a good organization. While it is the staff’s job to create the outputs of a good organizational performance, it is the board’s job to define them.

Exhibit 1 depicts a policy drafted at one time by the board of the United States Cycling Federation (USCF), subsequently renamed USA Cycling, Inc. (USACI), a membership organization located in Colorado Springs. 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?
Exhibit 1. Board Policy of the United States Cycling Federation (USCF).

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

1. The link between USCF and its membership.
2. 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.
3. The assurance of executive director performance.

Source: Reprinted with the permission of USA Cycling.

The USCF board determined that the board’s job purpose, most broadly stated, is to make whatever “contributions ... lead ... toward the desired performance and assure” that performance. While the preamble only gives a broad-brush explication of the job outputs of the board, the finer points 1–3 make the outputs far clearer.

The first point in Exhibit 1 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 they own.

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 (now USACI) 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.

The 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. 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.

USACI’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.

Optional Board Products

Although all other contributions to the organization beyond the core three may be delegated to the CEO, it does not necessarily follow that the board should delegate them. One of the most common additional board products involves fund-raising.

Should a board be responsible for fund-raising? The answer depends on the kind of organization and its circumstances. From the perspective of governance concepts per se, one can only say that fund-raising, at the board’s discretion, may be either delegated
or retained. If a board chooses to assume this responsibility, it should define the contribution well enough that there is no confusion between staff and board responsibilities. One possible source of confusion is that "fund-raising" is an activity, not a result. Using results language will more likely force the board to confront the task it has taken on and its expectations of staff. For example, does the board merely make philanthropic contacts and leave responsibility for actually bringing in the money to staff? Or is the board responsible for the funding level, that is, everything up to and including the goal amount? Or does its responsibility lie somewhere in between? Wasteful conflict between the roles of the board (or its fund-raising committee) and the CEO (or the CEO's director of development) can be reduced, perhaps avoided, by defining the job in terms of the expected result rather than in terms of the means used to attain that result. After all, just as should be true with staff, the board's activities are not the issue, getting the job done is.

If fund-raising, public image, legislative impact, or other delegable performance areas are made board responsibilities, the board must organize to perform them. The board has the option of operating as a whole, in committees, or through individual assignments. In any event, it becomes the responsibility of the board, not staff, to develop and use whatever methods are necessary. If the board wants the staff to carry out and be responsible for the outcome of a specific task, then that task should not be part of the board's job. Policy control by the board will suffice.

Whatever the board decides about assuming more than the basic three responsibility areas, the matter must be made explicit and all further board activities made consonant. It is important that the initial three core areas, because they cannot be delegated, be given primacy. No board should add items unless it is sure its allegiance to the first three will not be diluted.

Policy Governance Is Not a "Hands-Off" Model

Because the Policy Governance approach is a radical departure from the traditional form of governance, CEOs and board members sometimes mistakenly characterize Policy Governance as a "hands-off" model of board governance. We assume that by "hands-off" they mean a laissez-faire, uninvolved approach to board control over management, wherein the board stays out of the CEO's hair. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth.

The best governance is hands off about some things and decidedly hands on about other things. The trick is in knowing when to be hands on and when to be hands off.

A responsible governing board should govern. It is not a figurehead. As owner-representative, the board holds title to the most authoritative function in the organization, a function that is more authoritative than that of its CEO, its staff professionals, its legal counsel, its auditing firm, and even its funding sources. Accompanying this considerable authority is an equally considerable accountability: the board is accountable for everything the organization is, everything it does, and everything it achieves—or fails to achieve.

The board bears the full amount of cumulative responsibility, bearing more cumulative responsibility than the CEO because the board is responsible for itself, the CEO, and the entire organization. Designing the board's job simply entails deciding what direct work the board can do to fulfill its extensive cumulative responsibility.

A Board Member's Approach to the Job

One of the reasons a board member's job is so difficult is that "the job" is essentially a group responsibility. In fact, it is hard to discuss how an individual is to approach a group task. Yet each board member has a responsibility to come with an effective mind set, to carry out his or her part of preparation and participation, and to take responsibility for the group. These are not always easy tasks.

Some advice follows on the frame of mind and individual preparations necessary for a given board member to play an effective role in creating a productive board.

1. **Be prepared to participate responsibly.** Participating responsibly means to do your homework, come prepared to work
(sometimes the work is to listen), agree and disagree as your values dictate, and accept the group decision as legitimate even if not—in your opinion—correct. It is not acceptable, for example, to have opinions but not express them.

2. **Remember your identity is with the ownership, not the staff.** Identifying closely with your staff will be inviting in that you may be in conversation with them about issues more than you will be with the ownership. You will come to use staff’s abbreviations and short-hand language. Be careful that you don’t become more connected with staff than with those who own the organization. Be a microcosm of your ownership, not a shadow of the staff.

3. **Represent the ownership, not a single constituency.** You will understand and personally identify with one or more constituencies more than others. That provincial streak is natural in everyone, but your civic trusteeship obligation is to rise above it. If you are a teacher, you are not on the board to represent teachers. If you are a private businessperson, you are not there to represent that interest. You are a board member for the broad ownership. There is no way that the board can be big enough to have a spokesperson for every legitimate interest, so in a moral sense you must stand for them all. Think of yourself as being from a constituency, but not representing it.

4. **Be responsible for group behavior and productivity.** While doing your own job as a single board member is important, it does not complete your responsibility. You must shoulder the potentially unfamiliar burden of being responsible for the group. That is, if you are part of a group that doesn’t get its job done, that meddles in administration, or that breaks its own rules, you are culpable.
5. **Be a proactive board member.** You are not a board member to hear reports. You are a board member to make governance decisions. Listening while staff or committees recount what they have been busy doing is boring and unnecessary. Of course, it is sometimes important to get data through reports, but don't let that cast you in a passive role. Even when you are receiving education, do so as an active participant, searching doggedly for the wisdom that will enable good board decisions. Make “show and tell” board meetings passé.

6. **Honor divergent opinions without being intimidated by them.** You are obligated to register your honest opinion on issues the board takes up, but other board members are obligated to speak up as well. Encourage your colleagues to express their opinions without allowing your own to be submerged by louder or more insistent comrades. You are of little use to the process if full expression of your ideas can be held hostage by a louder member.

7. **Use your special expertise to inform your colleagues’ wisdom.** If you work in accounting, law, construction, or another skilled field, be careful not to take your colleagues off the hook with respect to board decisions about such matters. To illustrate, an accountant board member shouldn’t assume personal responsibility for assuring fiscal soundness. But it is all right for him or her to help board members understand what fiscal jeopardy looks like or what indices of fiscal health to watch carefully. With that knowledge, the board can pool its human values about risk, brinkmanship, overextension, and so forth in the creation of fiscal policies. In other words, use your special understanding to inform the board’s wisdom, but never to substitute for it.

8. **Orient to the whole, not the parts.** Train yourself to examine, question, and define the big picture. Even if your expertise and comfort lie in some subpart of the organization challenge, the subpart is not your job as a board member. You may offer your individual expertise to the CEO, should he or she wish to use it. But in such a role, accept that you are being a volunteer consultant and leave your board member hat at home.

9. **Think upward and outward more than downward and inward.** There will be great temptation to focus on what goes on with management and staff instead of what difference the organization should make in the larger world. The latter is a daunting task for which no one feels really qualified, yet it is the board member’s job to tackle it.

10. **Tolerate issues that cannot be quickly settled.** Shorter-term, more concrete matters can give you a feeling of completion, but are likely to involve you in the wrong issues. If you must deal with such matters, resign from the board and apply for a staff position.

11. **Don’t tolerate putting off the big issues forever.** The really big issues will often be too intimidating for you to reach a solution comfortably. Yet in most cases, the decision is being made anyway by default. Board inaction itself is a decision. Don’t tolerate the making of big decisions by the timid action of not making them.

12. **Support the board’s final choice.** No matter which way you voted, you are obligated to support the board’s choice. This obligation doesn’t mean you must pretend to agree with that choice; you may certainly maintain the integrity of your dissent even after the vote. What you must support is the legitimacy of the choice that you still don’t agree with. For example, you will support without reservation that the CEO must follow the formal board decision, not yours.

13. **Don’t mistake form for substance.** Don’t confuse having a public relations committee with having good public relations. Don’t confuse having financial reports with having sound finances. Don’t confuse having a token constituent board member with
having sufficient input. Traditional governance has often defined responsible behavior procedurally (do this, review that, follow this set of steps) instead of substantively, so beware of the trap.

14. **Observe about ends.** Keep the conversation about benefits, beneficiaries, and costs of the benefits alive at all times. Converse with staff, colleague board members, and the public about these matters. Ask questions, consider options, and otherwise fill most of your trustee consciousness with issues of ends.

15. **Don’t expect agendas to be built on your interests.** The board’s agenda is a product of careful crafting of the board’s job, not a laundry list of trustee interests. Remember, too, that you are not on the board to help the staff with your special expertise, but to govern. No matter how well you can do a staff job, as a board member you are not there to do it or even to advise on it. If you wish to offer your help as an individual—apart from your trustee duties—do so, but take great care that all parties know you are not acting as a board member. The staff’s using you as an adviser or helper must remain a staff prerogative rather than yours.

16. **The organization is not there for you.** Being an owner representative is very different from seeing the organization as your personal possession. Remember that the organization does not exist to satisfy board members’ needs to feel useful, self-actualized, involved, or entertained. Of course, it’s fine to feel these things and perfectly acceptable to seek whatever fulfillment governance can give you. But the board job must be designed foremost around the right of the ownership to be faithfully served in the determination of what the organization should accomplish.

17. **Squelch your individual points of view during monitoring.** Your own values count when the board is creating policies. But when the CEO’s performance is monitored, you must refer only to the criteria the board decided, not what your opinion was about those criteria. In other words, the CEO must be held accountable to the board’s decisions and in fairness cannot be judged against your opinion. You should present any opinion you may have about amending the policies, of course, but not so as to contaminate the monitoring process.

18. **Support the chair in board discipline.** Although the board as a whole is responsible for its own discipline, it will have charged the chair with a special role in the group’s confronting its own process. Don’t make the chair’s job harder, rather ask what you can do to make it easier.
Focused, specific agenda.

Begin and end meetings on time.

Keep group on-task.

Distribute information requiring review and decision in advance of the meeting.

Call members when helpful to explain items needing a vote prior to the meeting (count votes ahead of time).

Communicate, communicate --- provide information regularly; clue Board members into “inside” information when it is appropriate (and not illegal).

Show respect --- involve the Board in park agency/organization activities, conferences, media events; recognize them publicly whenever possible; give them prominent roles when appropriate.

Make sure you have good Board members to communicate with!

Establish a 5-year set of goals and objectives that they want to accomplish --- each year determine if they are working on their goals and if progress is occurring.

Take the time to have direct and individual contact with each Board member every year so they can tell you about their individual interests and goals for being part of your organization. It is a good time to clarify priorities.

Involve individual members of your boards in helping you solve issues and problems with the general public in the area they represent.

Have a very clear strategic plan with well defined objectives connected to the department and park missions that are regularly in front of them.

Involve them in review of these strategies and incorporate their input in the objectives within the parameters of mission and authority or purpose of the Board.

Hold a board meeting in a retreat setting to resolve their roles with that of the agency director and staff roles, advisory and policy versus management, with specific reference to the statutory role of the Board versus the statutory role of the agency and administrator duties.
With each new Board member, have and present them with a powerpoint presentation on Board responsibility to help orient them and to help them understand their role.

Communicate often and clearly to avoid any possible surprises. Don’t hide things from them, they will find out from other sources.

Include at least one powerpoint presentation on a good thing the department is doing. In other words, brag to them!

Invite them to participate in department activities or special events. Let them help you!

Give them advance notice on controversial issues. Do not expect them to take action on a controversial issue the same meeting/day that the issue is introduced.

Be honest and forthright at all times.

Understand that a board member is most often only a part-time responsibility. Do not expect them to be an expert on all issues.

Provide them with sufficient information to make an informed decision, but do not get them bogged down in details.

Get to know your board members and their comfort zones with various levels of detail. This is a balancing act. They should not be expected to merely “rubber stamp” everything. It is up to you to gain their confidence in you as staff.

Maintain regular on-going communication, and keep them abreast of your issues, successes and needs.

Have lunch with the Board and the Board chair on a bi-monthly, or regular, basis.

Involve commission members in issues of special interest to them.

Know the interests of your board members.

Involve board members early with site visits, program activities, and conferences with volunteers and friends. This helps to build understanding and develops advocacy.

Expose board members to staff --- this builds board members’ confidence in staff, and gains recognition with staff.

Only make promises you can keep and within your authority.

Build bridges among and between members.