TOWARD AN EXCEPTIONAL BOARD

The vast majority of bar association boards responsibly oversee their organizations' activities and finances. But truly exceptional organizations—bar associations included—have boards that are commensurately exceptional. So, what makes the difference? What makes the difference between ordinary and extraordinary? According to the governance experts at Boardsource,

EXCEPTIONAL BOARDS:

1. Define, and are continually guided by the organization’s mission. Whom does the bar serve, and what impact do we want it to have? What’s the appropriate balance between the bar’s responsibility to serve members and its obligation to serve the public?

2. Plan for the organization’s future. How will changes in the lawyer population and in the practice of law affect our mission or the way we do business? What do we want our organization to look like in three years? In five years? In ten years? Do we use our plan to guide decision making on an ongoing basis?

3. Govern with integrity and transparency. Do I fully grasp my fiduciary responsibility to the bar association? Are we always careful to use the bar’s resources in a responsible manner? Are we sensitive to situations where there may be a conflict of interest? Do we deal with those situations appropriately?

4. Focus on results. What do we want our programs and services to achieve? Do our programs continue to have the impact we anticipated they would? Do we regularly adjust or eliminate programs that aren’t delivering enough value?

5. Provide financial oversight and long-term financial planning. Does our budget reflect our bar’s priorities? Are we comfortable with our financial reporting and controls? Are we identifying our financial risks and planning for our long-term future?

6. Cultivate a productive partnership with the executive director. Do our board and executive director work cooperatively to advance the bar’s mission? Do I understand when it’s the board’s responsibility to take the lead and when it’s the executive director’s responsibility? Does the board regularly provide performance feedback to the executive director? When concerns or problems arise, is our board addressing them promptly and candidly?

7. Foster a culture of inquiry and continuous learning. Do we fully vet issues before the board, or do we tend to defer to the opinions of those in leadership positions? Do we seek the opinion of experts outside the board? Do we avoid “group think” and encourage dissent? Do we make time to learn something new at every board meeting?

8. Serve as ambassadors to members and the community. Do I protect and promote the bar’s reputation? Do we make the most of our opportunities to support and promote the bar?

9. Develop the board. Do we effectively recruit, elect and educate our board members? Do we periodically assess our individual and collective performance on the board, and hold ourselves accountable? Are we adequately identifying and preparing future leaders?

Do you have a high-performance board?

Consumed with today’s issues ➔ Focuses on what happens next
Reactive board ➔ Actively identifies desired outcomes
Bogged down in minutiae ➔ Focused on global issues
Collects information ➔ Uses information
Deferential board ➔ Board that values differences of opinion and dissent
Passive/Rubber-stamp board ➔ Active/Informed/Strategic Board

The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence—it is to act with yesterday’s logic.
—Peter Drucker