

10 HABITS OF HIGHLY-EFFECTIVE GOVERNING BODIES

Carl H. Neu, Jr.
Lakewood, Colorado

Local government operations directly affect our daily existence and experiences and the quality of life we perceive we have within our communities. No local government deserves, nor should its citizens tolerate, governing bodies and elected and appointed public officials who don't exhibit extraordinary effectiveness, integrity and competence in leading their community's public institutions.

Thomas Cronin, a recognized authority on public policy, defines leadership as, "making things happen that might not otherwise happen, and preventing things from happening that ordinarily might happen. It is a process of getting people together to achieve common goals and aspirations. Leadership is a process that helps people transform intentions into positive action, visions into reality." The quality of leadership effectiveness demonstrated by a governing body and its ability to be highly-effective are not attributes bestowed upon it by a swearing-in ceremony. They are the result of disciplined adherence to a set of fundamental principles and skills that characterize highly-effective governing bodies. Listed below are 10 "habits" of highly effective governing bodies based upon the author's observations of hundreds of city, county, special service district and school district governing bodies over the last twenty years.

1. Think and Act Strategically

A governing body's primary responsibility is not just to make policy or do its "Roman Emperor" routine (thumbs up or thumbs down) on agenda items at public meetings. It is to determine and achieve citizens' desires for the community's future. Governing bodies and their administrative teams must accept responsibility for shaping the future of the community by expanding their mental horizons to identify and meet the challenges that must be addressed through decisive leadership and goals for the attainment of that future.

A strategic leader always comes at you from the future and takes you "back to the future" from the present. This leadership adventure starts with *vision*, and evolves to defining the strategic issues that must be mastered to achieve the vision. The next step is the development of long-range goals that address these strategic issues and which provide decision-making and budgetary focus for the successful implementation of these goals. Living from one annual budget to another, and from one meeting to the next, condemns your community and its future to happenstance and the type of thinking that befuddles national governance and policy. For this reason, polls show an overwhelming majority of citizens want important issues affecting their lives to be decided at the local, "home town" level. Here, they expect leadership, sound thinking, decisive action, and accountability for results.

2. Respect "shared constituency": what do the *people* need?

No city, town, county, local government jurisdiction or non-governmental community entity is an island. The actions and decisions of any one affects all others. But, there is an even more profound reality: most governmental jurisdictions and non-governmental entities overlap in representing and providing service to the same people, i.e., shared constituencies. For example, any given citizen is represented and served simultaneously by the federal, state, county, and city governments plus the school district, special purpose districts, neighborhood associations, chambers of commerce, newspaper publishers, non-profits, etc.

These governments and community entities usually see themselves as separate institutions, often with conflicting and competing agendas rather than as components contributing in a coordinated and integrated manner to seamless service delivery meeting the citizens' needs. Frequently, local governments and community entities operate as special interests advocating their particular institutional needs and prerogatives. They fail to define how a public service category meeting the needs of a community of shared constituents (public safety, transportation, community development, human services, health care, education, etc.) is defined and functions in a seamless manner with each jurisdiction and entity ensuring its appropriate contribution to the effective and efficient performance of the whole service system.

An example of a service category system is roads. A citizen expects to be able to get from point a to point b on good quality roads that make this possible. That citizen does not want to think, nor cares about, "whose road am I on now; a federal, state, community or city road?" To that citizen "roads are roads" and it is up to all the government entities to make the system work! The same for public safety, and all services. When a sheriff's deputy can not communicate with a city police officer due to different radio systems and frequencies, it is a service system breakdown which doesn't meet the citizen's need for seamless effective service.

Effective governing bodies recognize they must *horizontally* (local government with local government with community entities) and *vertically* (local government to federal and state government) coordinate and integrate to ensure citizens' needs are met. They also recognize that collaboration and integration work best if it originates at the local government, city and county, level. It is at this level where needs are best defined and responded to by service providers. In reality, all government, as it touches peoples daily lives and existence, is local.

3. Understand and Demonstrate the Elements of Teams and Teamwork

Governing bodies by law, exist and have authority only when their members convene as a “body” to do business. Each member is a component of a corporate being which must speak, act, and fulfill its commitments with one voice, in a mature, effective and reliable manner. Governing bodies are collections of diverse individuals who come together to constitute and act as an entity, and only when operating as that entity do they exercise authority and perform in fulfillment of their purpose. This is a classic definition of team. Carl Larson and Frank LaFasto, two preeminent authorities on teams and teamwork, define team as an entity comprised of two or more people working together to accomplish a specific purpose that can be attained only through coordinated activity among the team members. In short, a team is an entity that exists to fulfill a specific function, or purpose, made up of disparate, interdependent parts (individuals) who collectively achieve a capacity that none of its members could demonstrate individually.

Teams always have two components that one might call their “S” components: *systemicness* and *synergy*. All teams are systemic, by definition, being made up of interdependent parts (people) who affect each other’s performance and that of the team. Synergy is the ability to achieve an effect, when working together as a team, that is more than the sum of the team members’ individual efforts. While all teams are systemic, relatively few are synergistic unless their members understand, master and demonstrate the fundamentals of teamwork which are:

- a clear sense of purpose and goals;
- clearly define roles and relationships that unite individual talents and capacities into team performance;
- integration of members who have basic technical, interpersonal, and rational decision making competence;
- a commitment to team success and quality performance;
- a climate of trust, openness, and mutual respect;
- clear standards of success and performance excellence;
- the support, resources and recognition to achieve success; and
- principled and disciplined leadership.

Highly-effective governing bodies spend time building their sense of being a team and their skills for productive teamwork.

4. Master Small Group Decision Making

Most local government governing bodies are classic small groups, with fewer than a dozen people. Small groups demonstrate certain skills and behaviors that “link” their members together. They also have clearly defined processes for making decisions in fulfillment of that group’s purpose. Figure 1 summarizes the “skill sets” essential to small group effectiveness.

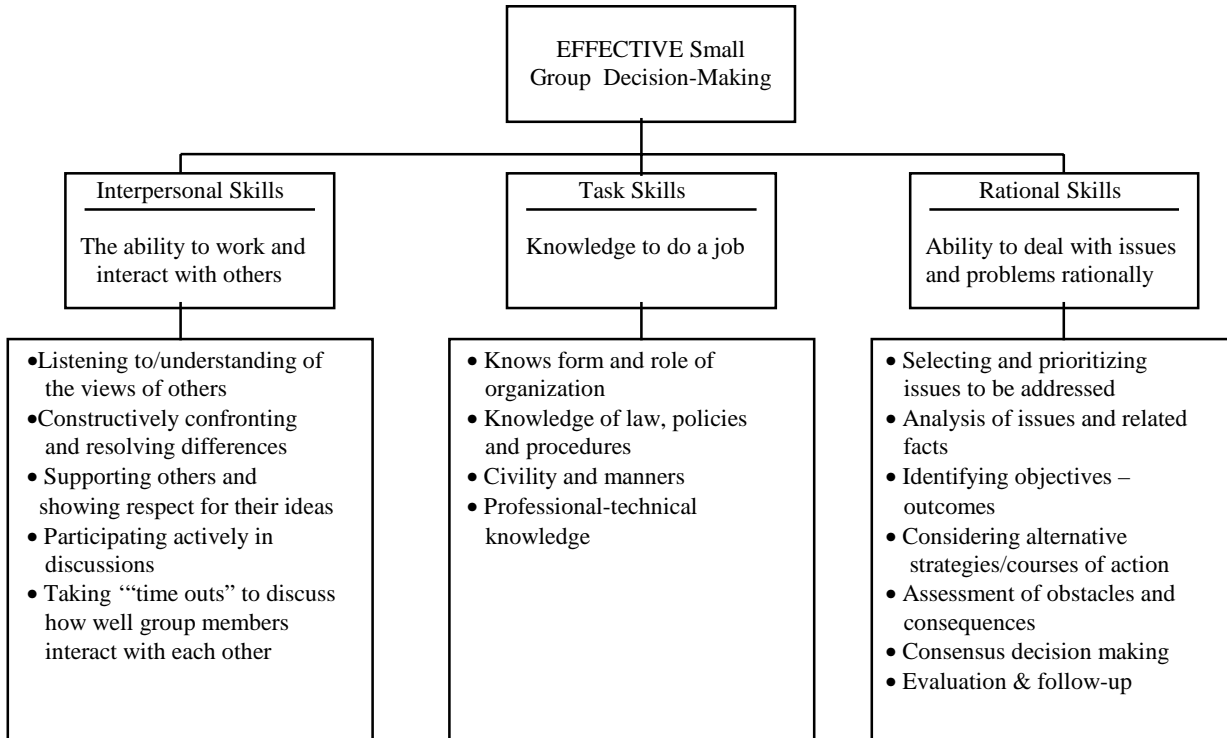


Figure 1: Effective Small Group Decision-Making

5. Have Clearly Defined Roles and Relationships

Each team member’s contribution to the team’s efforts and success must be defined in terms of roles to be assumed (functions) and how that role is to be carried out through one’s behavior (performance).

Role has two elements: *function*, the specific responsibilities of that role irrespective of incumbency, and *performance*, how one occupying the role is expected to behave and fulfill his/her responsibilities. Most governing bodies, whether through charter, statute or ordinance, have clear definitions of their function. The performance component must be defined within the team through discussion and mutual definition of those behaviors and practices expected of the governing body’s members in the conduct of their duties and interactions.

Vince Lombardi when asked, what makes a winning team, replied, “start with the fundamentals. A player’s got to know the basics of the game and how to play his (her) position. The players have to play as a team; not a bunch of individuals. The difference between mediocrity and greatness is the feeling the players have for each other,” (relationships). Teams talk about and define expected roles and relationships and give constructive feedback to their members on the degree to which they are fulfilling these expectations.

6. Honor the Board-Staff Partnership

We have all heard the popular phrase, “the governing body makes policy, staff implements policy”. This is a total misconception of reality. Policy making and policy implementation are not distinct and separate functions. Policy making-implementation is a continuum of thought and relationships that transforms ideas and abstractions (visions, policies, goals, and plans) into defined, observable ends or outcomes (results, programs, projects, deliverable services). Board members and staff share this continuum as partners ensuring each other’s success. Each person plays an important role in creating sound policies and ensuring their effective implementation through reliable administrative practices and performance. Figure 2 depicts this partnership and continuum.

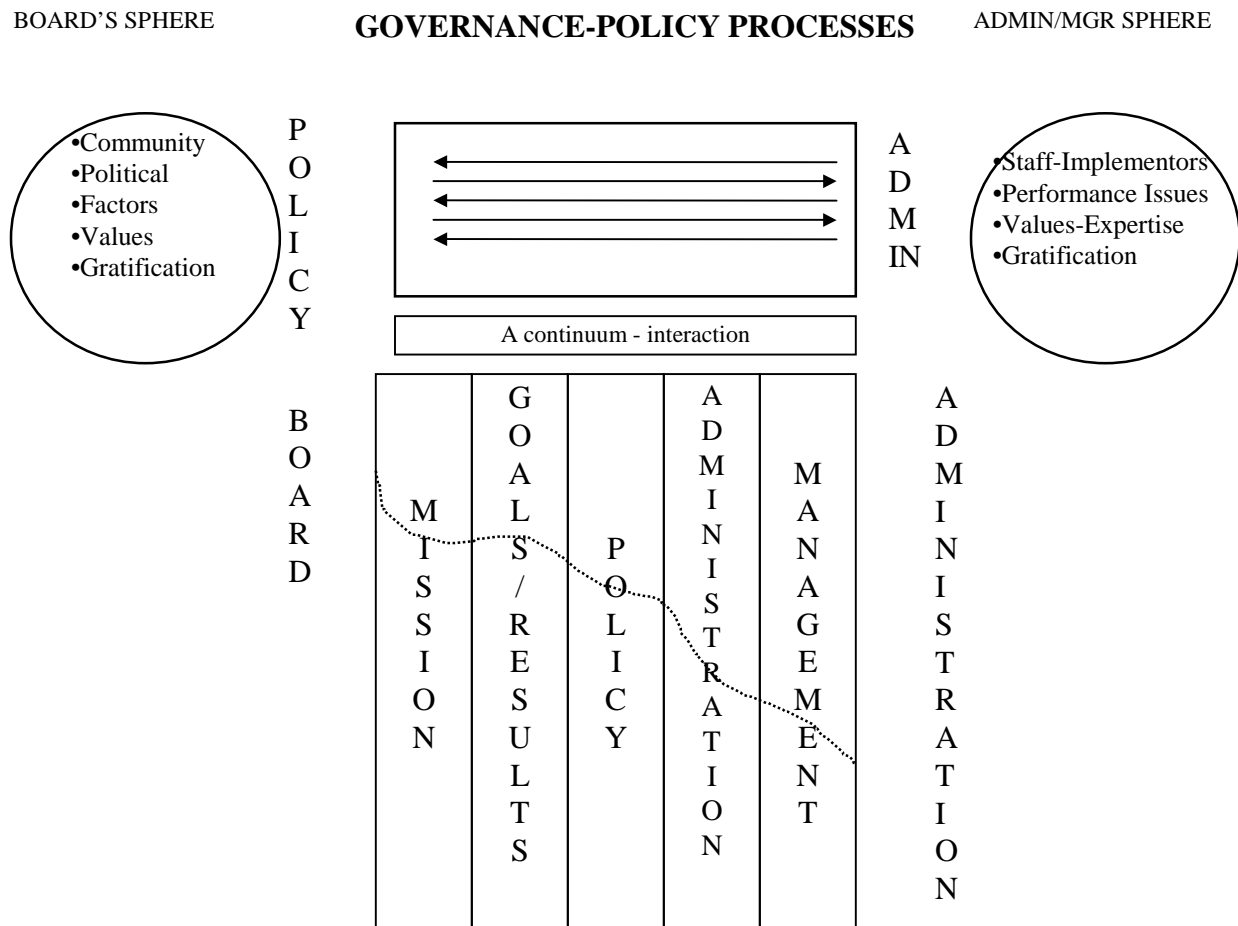


Figure 2: Board-Staff Partnership

To what degree is this partnership understood, discussed, and respected by board members?

John Carver, a widely acclaimed author who writes about boards that make a difference, describes this partnership as one in which boards define what needs are to be met and ends (outcomes) achieved. He believes that boards should allow staff, within board-established limits, to define the means for achieving these ends. He sees a board-staff linkage that empowers staff to do its tasks and be evaluated on the results produced.

The board-staff partnership functions best when it is vision-driven and goals based. Boards that accept and abide by this partnership focus their energy on establishing vision and goals, on good policy, and on empowering effective staff performance. Those that do not do this, frequently fall prey to micromanaging; that is, they will perceive a need to become involved in, or retain approval over, staff activity and plans.

A critical element and important board task in this partnership is the evaluation of the manager or administrator, based upon clearly defined goals, policies, and established guidelines on executive performance.

7. Allocating Governing Body Time and Energy Appropriately

Time, especially to elected officials, is a critically precious and limited, commodity. The typical board or council operates as a *governing body*, providing governance, for relatively few hours; usually less than 200 hours annually, as compared to the typical 2400+ hours per work year for senior administrators. How boards allocate and use their time is vital to their leadership effectiveness and performance.

Boards, like teams, “play” in a number of settings or “arenas” to achieve overall, peak performance. There are four board-staff arenas, and each must be appreciated for its purpose and contribution to a board’s effectiveness.

- Goal-setting (retreats or “advances”)
- Exploration and analysis (study sessions)
- Disposition/legislation (regular public meetings)
- Community relations (interactions with constituencies and other jurisdictions and agencies)

Figure 3 identifies the purpose, typical setting, focus, and key characteristics of each arena. All four arenas are essential to highly-effective governing body’s fulfillment of its leadership, policy making, goal setting, and empowering responsibilities.

| ARENA | GOAL-SETTING | EXPLORATION & ANALYSIS | DISPOSITION-LEGISLATION | COMMUNITY RELATIONS |
|---------------------|---|---|--|--|
| Purpose | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish vision Explore potentials Set goals Direction/Priorities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Community -Services -Staff action -Budgets | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understanding the issue(s) Problem identification Selecting “best options” Building commitment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Official action Vote on items <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Resolutions -Ordinances Public input Mobilization of support | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interaction with constituency-citizens Building alliances Outreach-liaison Coordination with other entities |
| Typical Setting | Retreat/Advance - informal off-site workshop | Study Session - conference room | Public - formal board meeting in chambers | Numerous - diverse formats |
| Focus | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Future of county, city/community Evaluation of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Needs -Trends -Strategic issues Community desires & values Leadership | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developing knowledge for decision making Sorting of options Examine consequences Set strategies Ability to make competent & informed decisions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agenda - formality “Show” of authority Ratification/ Adoption Political pressures Psychological needs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communication Problem solving Collaboration - coordination Partnership Acting as a community |
| Key Characteristics | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Informality Sharing of options Open dialogue Creative thinking Humor - adventure Face-to-face/Group interaction | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Board-staff dialogue Questioning - testing of ideas Information exchange Negotiating - consensus building No voting Face-to-face/group interaction | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formal meetings Rules and procedures Public input/involvement High visibility Pressure/advocacy from groups Voting Group interaction | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Being “outside” city hall/court house Responding to requests Joint ventures Interagency activity Multiple interaction modes and communication techniques |

Figure 3: Arenas for Governing Body-Staff Performance

Highly-effective governing bodies will hold at least one goal-setting retreat or “advance” annually. They also will hold two study sessions monthly, usually between regularly scheduled public hearings. Here they confer with staff and other experts on significant items under consideration requiring eventual official actions. While these study sessions are open to the public, as observers, the public should not participate in the board-staff dialogue. Many boards short-change this arena, pushing the opportunity for learning into the formal public hearing, which is not designed to promote much in-depth analysis of complex issues. The arena of *disposition/legislation* is designed to get to a vote, not promote careful analysis of complex issues.

The fourth arena, *community and interjurisdictional relations*, is becoming more important. It is rapidly transforming the role of the governing body and how it and its members spend their time. Communities today are more dependent upon sophisticated alliances and partnerships among groups, public and private entities. All jurisdictions are subject to multiple, profound changes in how public officials operate as they deal with complex multijurisdictional and regional issues and the growing popularity of citizen democracy and community building/renewal. Today, the community arena requires more time spent in interactions outside of city hall/courthouse and puts greater time pressure on elected officials.

8. Have Clear Rules and Procedures for Board Meetings

Board meetings exist for the purpose of doing the board's business. Literature on how to conduct effective and productive meetings specifies the need for, and adherence to, clearly defined rules and procedures. Many boards, however, drift from these rules and procedures in pursuit of informality, collegiality, and "just being nice." They let their meetings drone on with lack of focus, redundant comments and endless discussions. Rules and procedures do not preclude citizen input, courtesy or sensitivity to public concerns and viewpoints. They respect all these elements and the necessity to conduct business in an orderly, disciplined and productive manner.

9. Conduct Systematic and Valid Assessments of Policy Implementation and the Public's Concerns and Evaluation of the Boards/Council's Performance.

Governing bodies, like most legislative bodies, frequently fall into the Jean Luc Picard syndrome (Star Trek II) and simply tell their staffs: "Make it so." They assume that board action equates to policy and program implementation. The next time board hears about the policy is when a problem or crisis arises. Highly effective governing bodies expect periodic feedback on policy results and on possible policy amendments that may be required. This feedback can be provided through progress reports, status memos or newsletters, and "policy reviews."

Elections are contests among individuals vying to become a member of an elected governing body. They are not valid, objective assessments of the public's feeling about the quality of board's performance as a governing body and about whether or not it is addressing issues effectively. Highly effective boards seek feedback through a number of proven market research tools such as focus groups, surveys and questionnaires. Typically, the phone calls a board member receives, or the comments made in public hearings, are not valid or accurate reflections of the entire community's sentiments about issues and the board's performance. "Market research feedback" should be ongoing and included in the annual goal setting retreat or advance.

10. Practice Continuous Personal Learning and Development as a Leader

Leaders read, attend workshops, and constantly seek information, understanding and

insight. Elizabeth Kautz, Mayor of Burnsville, Minnesota, giving advice to newly-elected municipal officials said: “Decide what your role is, identify the skills you need to be effective in that role, and GET THEM! Highly-effective governing bodies are comprised of members who honestly know they don’t know it all. They take advantage of the myriad of opportunities to learn and perfect their skills by reading, going to workshops, and forums that can expand their skills to lead and govern well.

Highly-effective governing bodies also learn as a group. They assess objectively their performance relative to each of the ten habits. They also decide where gains can be made and set up the opportunity through board workshops to learn the skills to make these gains.

The last, and probably most important, point: Keep your sense of humor. Governance is a serious and sometimes messy business dealing with vital issues affecting our communities and the quality of life we experience daily within them. Humor reduces friction and stress, lets others know we and they are human, and is a pause that refreshes our insight and commitment. It is essential to creating and maintaining relationships. It also can open one’s mind to new ideas.

Every community deserves nothing less than highly effective governing bodies that accept accountability for the community’s performance in creating its future and in effectively addressing, in the present, those challenges vital to attaining that future. That is what is at stake: our communities’ future. With few exceptions, every board can be highly effective and can provide strong leadership. But to become effective requires a good governance model and disciplined adherence to the principles (habits) of effectiveness.

Carl Neu, Jr., is executive vice president of Neu & Company, Lakewood, Colorado. All rights reserved to Neu & Company and the Center for the Future of Local Governance, 1997.