

Bigger, Better, Bolder, Braver

The Benefits of Working with Fully Inclusive Boards

Good governance ensures the overall direction, effectiveness, supervision, and accountability of an organisation. It demonstrates a willingness and ability to act in the best interests of the association, ensuring the operation of effective, open and ethical processes which adhere to the law and stand up to scrutiny. But what does that mean practically speaking?

Words Jennifer Jenkins, IAPCO member & director of Worldspan

I am a firm believer in the power of associations to bring about change and improve the world. Despite this, the governance structures used by these groups are frequently criticized. If you look up definitions of "good governance," you'll find negative language used. It is important to recognize that boards and their members are not just supervisors and regulators, but also play a key role in driving innovation and progress.

Notwithstanding the obvious frustrations of working with sometimes overly complex committee structures (necessary to ensure representation, diversity and inclusivity) my own experience of working with association boards is that they are always open to challenge and, importantly, to change. And, without exception, the bigger and broader the board, the bolder and braver the output.

We know there are four main reasons why we join associations - why we choose to actively "associate." To achieve a sense of belonging; we are tribal. To achieve a degree of distinctiveness; we are unique. To achieve a sense of status; we are peer-minded. But most importantly, to reduce uncertainty; we are reassured. Evidence suggests that in times of crisis - in troubled times like these - we feel the need to associate more and not less. To compare experience, to share practice, to set benchmarks and to map a collective way forward.



SIMPLE DEFINITION

Andrew Corbett-Nolan of the Good Governance Institute offers a simple definition. "Good governance makes it easy to do the right thing and really difficult to do the wrong thing." And association boards are always concerned with doing the right thing. Making the right decisions for the member communities they serve. They are, in fact, collectively tasked with making progress. Of course, decision-making can be slow, sometimes even laboured, but there is no direct correlation between a fast decision and good or right decision.

But what does this mean - practically speaking - in my world of association management and specifically conference, congress and content design and delivery? How does good governance help to drive better education, engagement and end goals?

Good governance is reliant on good governors, or trustees. In most cases, volunteer trustees. And, in practical terms, that is where good governance pays off.

Trustees drive consensus in decision making. When we reach consensus, we make better and sometimes braver decisions. Without exception, my association clients are the first to innovate. And are, contrary to popularly held opinion, less risk adverse.

As conference and congress partners and planners they have been the first to go paperless, the first to go green, the first to go virtual and the first to go back in the meeting room.

Trustees drive clarity of role and purpose. When specialist expertise is needed, committees and their sub-committees are a blessing, not a curse. Without exception, my association clients are better able to group and re-group to cover decision-making ground. Committees are small and powerful allies in the race against time. And time is always of the essence when it comes to conference and congress planning.

Trustees drive commitment to the cause. When it comes to attracting new members, sponsors, and supporters, trustees are ready to step up to the challenge. I have found that my clients in the association sector are well-equipped and eager to promote the shared cause and leverage their professional connections for maximum impact.

Trustees drive engagement. When we need to design and deliver better delegate experiences, trustees are our best "mystery shoppers". Without exception, my association clients are better able to input into key content, programming and marketing decisions because they are, after all, delegates. They have vested interest in the success - educational and commercial - of conference and congress.

It is easy to get frustrated with committee-based decision making. Associations and the agencies (or in-house) providers who support them do not use the same, or even similar, business models. Agencies strive to do more with fewer people. Efficiency is a driver. Associations strive to do less but involve more people. Outcome is a driver.

Take a moment, at the beginning of any new project to map your committees, your communications, your channels and yes, your cast of committee characters of which there will be many. Put one person in charge of managing the planning process in a way that works for all parties.

Good governance drives successful outcomes. It may sometimes feel like a challenge but never let it become a chore.

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