

THE PROFESSIONAL GOVERNANCE BOARD

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Making Room for Failure in Order to Achieve Success

Effective governance boards continually strive for success. High achieving boards identify, invest in, celebrate and reward success, seeking to create a culture of success that permeates throughout the organization. This focus on achievement and success is commendable. But within this singular focus on success can reside the seeds of stasis and stagnation.

A potential side effect of developing a culture where success is continually identified and rewarded is a corresponding unwillingness to acknowledge and discuss failure. Where there is a focus on success failure can become stigmatized so that discussion of organizational failures either does not take place, or takes place in an atmosphere of discomfort and distrust.

A governance board that is committed to continuous improvement understands that an honest and searching discussion of organization failures is necessary to sustain achievement. Successful boards understand that today's failure is often the result of yesterday's success, with processes that resulted in previous success repeated even when they no longer yield positive results.

In order to facilitate the discussion of failure in a productive manner, a governance board needs to create an environment where real accountability can take place. Where individuals are comfortable identifying and discussing where they or the organization fell short, understanding that the organization will not learn from failure unless all are willing to thoughtfully examine and understand failure.

Governance boards can learn from the example of Engineers Without Borders – Canada (EWB), a non-profit organization that utilizes the skills of Canada's engineering sector to address issues of extreme poverty in Africa. In 2008 EWB published a report entitled "Learning from our Mistakes." This report contained stories of EWB's projects that failed, along with reflections on why these failures occurred. This formal reporting of EWB's failures has evolved into the "Failure Report," an annual publication that highlights the organization's failures. An admittedly bold and unusual initiative for an organization that is dependent on outside funding.

Professional governance boards can learn from the example of EWB and its willingness to embrace its failures in order to learn how to achieve continual and sustained success. As noted in the introduction to the 2010 Failure Report,

To be effective change agents, we need to remain humble and continuously learn, commit ourselves to self-reflection, be open about

our mistakes, and have the courage to take action, especially after failure. We also need to take individual responsibility for creating a culture in which failure is accepted and celebrated. It's the only way we can progress, innovate and learn.

It is unusual to find an organization that is comfortable with "celebrating" failure. This type of openness and honest examination of the roots and causes of an organization's success and failure as part of a process of continual learning does not just happen. Governance boards need to truly commit to the value of continuous improvement, and create a culture and environment where it is safe to thoughtfully discuss failure, with an eye toward understanding as opposed to recrimination.

As a public agency, it is not surprising that a board of education might not typically "accept and celebrate" failure. But in order to build an organization of sustained success, a discussion of our failures is essential. As William Gates, Sr., Co-Chair of the Gates Foundation, wrote in the Foreword to the 2010 Failure Report,

Learning and failing are both lifelong experiences. But whereas most institutions and individuals strive to be continuous learners, they strive equally hard to avoid failure and rarely acknowledge when it occurs. This approach is wrong and problematic. The lessons learned from failure and mistakes are often the most important....

Failure is not a precondition to success. But examined failure is. To take the next step as a professional governance board, create an environment where it is safe to acknowledge and examine failure. Consider regularly reporting your organization's shortcomings, along with lessons learned, in an attempt to understand how real, sustained success can occur. In this way your board can convey, it perhaps the most powerful way possible, the great value it places on learning and continuous improvement. Avoiding a discussion about your failures is understandable, but – if real learning and improvement is to take place – it is also unforgivable.