

Six Core Principles of Good Governance

In any polity, some core principles of governance apply:

1. **The congregation has one decision-making structure for governance and one for ministry, with a clear definition of which bucks stop where.** Governance bucks stop with the board, and Ministry bucks stop with the head of staff. All differences are reconciled directly rather than through third parties. Governance means “owning the place in behalf of the mission,” and ministry is the practical work of the church.
2. **Boards speak as a body, not as individuals.** Individual board members have no special authority outside board meetings. Board members often play program leadership roles as well, but need to always remember which hat they are wearing.
3. **Boards speak through written policies.** Like any human gathering, a board meeting is a cauldron of informal, nonverbal, and emotional communication. People come away from meetings with a “sense of the board” on any number of topics. Good boards make it clear that staff and others will not be expected to read the board’s mind, but must treat actions in the minutes as the final word.
4. **When delegating, leaders balance authority, guidance, and accountability.** Too often, congregations plug people into generic positions or point them in vague directions, then expect them to come back repeatedly to rehash each decision and appropriate each dollar. It is not fair to hold someone accountable for results when the results have not been specified, or to blame someone for violating an unstated rule. This principle applies when the board delegates to the staff, or when staff delegate to other staff or volunteers.
5. **Volunteers have the option to join a work crew without the risk of being trapped into a deliberative body, and vice versa.** Policy bodies should include a diversity of members; task groups should include only those who are in favor of the task. Once the direction has been set through proper process, someone should be charged with getting the job done.
6. **Staff and volunteers receive clear direction, clear limits, and maximum flexibility in choosing how to do their jobs.** Everyone deserves to grow into his or her maximum effectiveness, and effective workers do best when they and their work groups have the freedom to exercise independence, creativity, and choice.

Dan Hotchkiss, author of *Governance and Ministry: Rethinking Board Leadership* (Alban 2009)

Seven Ways to Improve Your Board

1. Start a board policy book (pp. 90–108)

Stop relying on your minutes to find out what your board has done.
Collect existing board policies into a book with sections.
“If it’s a policy, it’s in the book. If it’s not in the book, it’s not policy.”

2. Use a consent agenda (119–121)

The consent agenda contains actions the board will take without discussion.
The consent agenda and all reports go to the board in an advance packet.
At the meeting, any member may move a consent item to the main agenda.

3. Hold a regular “no-staff huddle” (121–123)

At the end of every meeting, excuse paid clergy and staff members.
Have a brief conversation about how the meeting went. Are there concerns that need to be raised with the clergy or staff? No action may be taken.
The chair or other designated leader immediately briefs the head of staff.

4. Write a board covenant (123–129)

What do you expect of board members? Financial support? Attendance?
Diligence? Personal religious growth?
Write your covenant, revise it regularly, and use it in recruiting new board members.

5. Appoint a board Governance Committee (128–129)

Maintains job description for board members, list of needed skills and qualities.
Works with nominating committee in recruiting new board members.
Leads annual board training session and review of board covenant.

6. Create a list of “open questions” (148–149)

For each of your key mission areas, identify the most important open questions
Exclude yes-or-no questions and questions to which you know the answer.
Plan for a year’s worth of board conversation without expecting answers soon.

7. Host wider conversations. (154–155)

Ask for input *before* the board makes up its mind.
Use an iterative process: define the questions, seek input, narrow the scope, seek input, choose options, seek input, float a trial balloon, seek input.
Feed the conversation with information, resources, and outside perspectives.
Record what is said and feed it back in writing.
Reference the wider conversation when the board makes its decision.