19 Years of Lessons Learned Through the Life-Cycle of Policy Governance®

1. Be wary of assumptions.
2. Change our mindset.
3. It's all or nothing.
4. Trust the process
5. Don't forget board capacity.
6. Allow enough time.
7. Put in the work.
8. Grow Institutional memory

1. Be wary of assumptions

a. Assumption: Innovation is always good

Investing in one initiative after another can be counter-productive if we always go for the next 'new thing.' Organizations need the time to learn and implement new practices.

b. Assumption: Enthusiasm lasts

When enthusiasm wanes, we relax, go through the motions, and let complacency kick in. Renewal and recommitment are necessary to keep this model working the way it should.

c. Assumption: New members need to commit

I used to think that the swearing in of new board members was good for the new board member, an opportunity to publicly commit to their responsibilities. Now I think all board members should periodically and collectively renew their commitment.

d. Assumption: Consensus decision-making is best

I used to think we needed consensus to protect against the "tyranny of the majority," and ensure all voices are heard. Now I think we should never grant any member a veto over the majority; that replaces tyranny of the majority with tyranny of the minority.

2. Change our board mindset

a. Focus the board's work

Both effective schools literature and policy governance theory tell us there is often a difference between what the board can control, and what matters. Think of all the things the board can control. Then think of what matters. The sweet spot for a board is our governing performance.

b. Focus the board's time

An audit of meetings reveals that although we still attend to many operational (means) issues when required by law, most of those issues are handled expeditiously via the consent or required approvals agenda. We now spend lots of time learning as a board, monitoring or self-monitoring, and reviewing/updating policy.

    c. **Change our thinking about strategic planning.**

From focusing on means. Strategic planning fell short when we tried to supplement the long-range plan with action plans to guide mid-term and short-term operational decisions. Our very detailed plan sat on the shelf. The two perspectives (strategic and operational) were disconnected.

To focusing on roles. We broke down traditional strategic planning into board-reserved and superintendent-delegated business. Through monitoring of ends and means policies the board retains overall control over both strategic and operational work, but avoids perpetuating the false notion that it is making or approving operational plans.

3. It's all or nothing

    a. **Understanding may differ**

I witnessed one CEO selectively introduce only policies guiding board member behavior, ignoring the rest of the model. PG is a coherent set of principles, but it is also complex and requires time and professional development for people to learn to use the system. I fully appreciate Carver's warning not to implementing the model piecemeal.

    b. **Too little board control – limit the executive**

I used to think board-CEO relationship policies drew a clear line between board (decides on ends) and CEO (means). Then I learned of situations in which CEOs of newly PG-trained boards insisted that staff means decisions by definition belong to the CEO, without board involvement. Board decisions in each limitations policy draw a more clear line between board-retained and CEO-delegated authority.

    c. **Too much board control – self-impose board restraint**

A board monitored staff means so relentlessly and in such detail that it undermined the CEO's freedom to interpret policy. It obsessed over the details in staff means monitoring reports, in effect using monitoring as a way to micromanage. The line between board and CEO decision-making requires not only the careful writing of policies, but faithful, thorough and effective monitoring and self-monitoring.

4. Trust the process

    a. **Wise habits**

Self-assessing board practice at the end of every meeting is the kind of wise habit that employs minor corrections to keep the board pointed in the right direction. We prevent little discrepancies from becoming major problems.

b. CEO Interpretation

I used to think that after conducting 16 monitoring cycles during the period from 2003 to 2019, we had a process that was in full adherence to the PG model. We have a process that needs periodic review and adjustment if necessary.

c. Monitoring and board development

Our monitoring cycle is not only an instrument of accountability, it also serves as an agent of change, improving board practice even while targeting organizational performance.

5. Don't forget board capacity

The board must never forget to assure its own governing capacity.

a. Self-monitoring and growth

Early on in our policy governance life cycle, after we had our routines established, I began to think that in conducting self-assessment we were just going through the motions. Now I think that through a routine of self-monitoring distributed in meeting agendas throughout the year, we have a habit of self-discipline that strengthens our board.

We began a habit of evaluating every meeting, reminding ourselves of our protocols. Last agenda item, before announcements, is meeting assessment, which takes only one or two minutes to assess board performance during the meeting. We rotate this responsibility among board members, one at a time using an evaluation checklist.

b. Board discipline

The responsibility of individual board members to enforce agreed-on protocols was accepted in theory, but acting on that commitment has not been consistent. We realized that any board member could and should remind colleagues of their commitments, so our board culture changed – now we are now more ready to shoulder this burden.

c. Professional development is for 'the board'

We used to think of board PD as something primarily for our newest board members, and (for more experienced members) as a self-selected individual activity, but over time we have recognized the need for continuous learning as a group to help all of us make good decisions about ENDS and MEANS and monitor for accountability.

d. Training

We used to think that board professional development was a matter of education: reading and understanding boardsmanship and governance concepts. Then we learned the value of training, rehearsing and repeating skills until action-response is systematic and not subject to chance. For example, using The Board Member's Playbook by Bill Charney and

Miriam Carver, we have practiced a disciplined response to a number of predictable scenarios. Training is not a dirty word.

e. Periodically conduct a "Deep dive" with PG principles

I used to think that writing PG principles in our policies and revisiting policies through periodic monitoring assured our alignment. Now I think that occasionally conducting an in-depth review of the 10 principles, looking for relevant artifacts and board behaviors, helps us to take stock and renew our model consistency in a more intentional way.

6. Allow enough time

a. Results take time

Once we launched our policy governance model we felt like we had arrived. It is a common feature of conference sessions that presentations are more often a celebration of "launch" and a premature declaration of success than they are evidence-based reports with measurable results.

b. Take the long view

Although a 'can do' attitude is great, real solutions to complex problems take time, sometimes a lot of time, to yield measurable results. In education...superintendents may take 4-5 years for systemwide impact. And for boards, I now think it takes 5-10 years.

c. Go slow to go fast

I used to think that preparing to launch this model is a process we should get through quickly, as implied by the commonly used term 'blitz.' Now I think of the saying "GO SLOW TO GO FAST"

d. Innovations that endure

What has made our innovation endure is that we have stuck with what works: governing with a stable and long-term vision, clarity of roles, intentional delegation accompanied by rigorous and ongoing monitoring for accountability, allowing operational management to take place without interference, and resisting the urge to move on to the 'next new thing.'

7. Put in the work

a. Set it and forget it

I used to think that with such a systematic process, once we had our model in place, and began to trust that process, the system would practically run itself. Board work cannot be effectively done by just setting it (our board routines) and forgetting it. We must commit to the ongoing hard work of governing if we are to be effective. We cannot forget it.

b. Policy Monitoring Cycle

We have learned that board work requires an ongoing commitment to the hard work of governing: Setting expectations; Doing the work; Collecting data; Comparing data with pre-written expectations; Requiring the CEO to bring the organization into compliance; and Considering adjustments as needed in policy; & Repeating the cycle

c. Work the process through a cycle of cycles

Our hard work became a continuing cycle of such accountability cycles, remaining alert for small improvements that can make a significant difference over time. Monitor one End at a time; Monitor one significant means policy (or group of related policies) at a time; Continue this cycle for all Ends and Means policies.

d. Cookin' lasts, kissin' don't

The laborious, often unglamorous work that policy governance requires reminds me of a plaque that my aunt used to display in her kitchen, which said "Cookin' lasts, kissin' don't." For policy governance its value is in the cookin' (laborious routines) rather than the kissin' (exciting and/or entertaining public events.)

8. Grow institutional memory

a. The value of institutional memory

I used to think that boards get better and better the longer they practice their craft. But there is a problem when we consider institutional memory (the board's collective accumulation of knowledge and skills) and the learning that comes with experience – mistakes made, corrective actions taken, finding out what works and what doesn't work.

b. Limitations

Some limitations on institutional memory with which boards struggle include: Turnover of members; Time; 'Amnesia'; Seniority.

c. Documentation and Transparency

Institutional memory goes beyond the sum total of individual board members' memory, but it must be created and maintained. Documentation and transparency are complementary tools supporting institutional memory.