

Board Evaluation With a Stopwatch

How Mountain Equipment Co-op's board shook up its annual peer evaluation to generate tangible feedback on director performance

SHONA MCGLASHAN

WE'VE ALL BEEN THERE – the annual cycle of checking endless boxes to evaluate the board, its committees and your fellow directors. After several years' worth of similar exercises, the Mountain Equipment Co-op (MEC) board of directors wondered whether there was a better way. The adaptation of a format used by one director's executive team created an innovative structure for face-to-face feedback. The board tried it out for the first time at its winter 2014 board meeting, and was impressed with the results.

How do you perform the exercise?

Preparation is key. Directors were invited to think in advance about their own boardroom performance and that of their peers. Board members identified, for each of their fellow directors as well as themselves, behaviours and contributions which they should start, continue and stop. MEC's governance team provided directors with a template to record their conclusions.

Then, in a managed, timed session – overseen by a member of the governance team with a stopwatch – each director spent 10 minutes face-to-face with each of his or her peers in turn. During each segment:

- Director A shared their assessment of their own start/ continue/ stop behaviours

- Director B supplied feedback (supporting, negating or changing director A's statements)
- The directors reversed roles so that B shared and A gave feedback. "It felt like director speed-dating," said one director.

The exercise took 90 minutes in total, and was characterized by quiet concentration, intense discussion and occasional bursts of laughter from the pairs of directors.

What is its value to directors?

While the process seems simple, MEC's board discovered that the exercise constituted a powerful tool for receiving tangible and constructive feedback. Directors reported that the greatest value lay in uncovering overall themes from the group, and that they felt highly motivated to implement behavioural changes as a result. "Way more valuable than our end-of-year [paper] survey," is how one director described the method. "It is easier to be frank and constructive face-to-face."

The combination of self-evaluation tied to external evaluation was a winning one for many of our board members. The process "yielded countless suggestions that had never occurred to me," a director commented. "It takes trust to truly get value out of this," observed another.

One director reported increased confidence in bringing senior-level

expertise to the board table.

Another felt bolstered in the ability to pursue challenging lines of questioning. Others received important feedback about how their demeanour and communication style were perceived by the group. Overall, directors rated the exercise highly and are keen to make it an annual part of the board's evaluation process.

For further information

MEC would be happy to share its templates with any interested boards (governance@mec.ca). As a co-op, MEC's nine-member board of directors is elected by and from its membership of 4.3 million.



Shona McGlashan is MEC's Chief Governance Officer and a director of the Canadian Cancer Society,

BC/Yukon. She was previously the Executive Director for the Vancouver Police Board and, before emigrating to Canada, served as a clerk in the British Parliament.

