

# Board Transition and Acceleration: Challenges and Best Practices

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In our most recent article, we urged healthcare boards to approach the CEO transition process thoughtfully, proactively, and strategically.<sup>1</sup> Such a process “positions the organization for the future while strengthening execution today.” It also *accelerates the time to impact* for a new leader when hired, setting the stage for a successful tenure.

The same benefits apply to board member transitions. Strategic, proactive transitioning is vital to getting new members up to speed quickly and facilitating their sustained success.



**Boards would benefit from turning over their members more than they do, whether to improve performance or to meet the need for new expertise and perspective.**

Effectiveness in identifying, cultivating, and integrating new directors is a defining trait of high-performing boards.<sup>2</sup> The key is linking the process to organizational strategy: Where are we going and what competencies,

characteristics, and experiences do we need in future board members to ensure success? Once we find those members, how can we pave the way for their immediate engagement and impact?

The need for proactive transitioning of new members would seem a given, but in our experience, few boards do it well. This is true across industries: seven in 10 boards report lagging on their own board succession and transition planning. Roughly one-third have little or no discussion around it, while another third handle it informally or on an *ad hoc* basis when seats need to be filled.<sup>3</sup> Many boards still rely heavily on tapping into existing member networks to source board candidates.

Boards encounter many of the same pitfalls in member transition as they do in CEO transition: relationship concerns (messy emotions come into play), lack of role clarity, and a limited investment in onboarding with a tendency to “finish early,” assuming their job is done once a new member signs on.

This article addresses the key stages of board member transition, as well as pitfalls and how they can be avoided and turned into strengths and opportunities. It also provides practical advice for accelerating the impact of new members in an era when boards, like their organizations, must stay sharp and pivot quickly.

## >>> KEY BOARD TAKEAWAYS

- Thoughtful, strategic planning for board member transitions is crucial for strengthening current execution and positioning the organization for future success.
- Effective transitioning processes accelerate new members’ “time to impact,” ensuring they can contribute meaningfully and quickly.
- Boards must manage emotional attachments, clarify roles, and avoid stopping transition efforts prematurely to ensure smooth and successful integration of new members.

## Benefits of Strategic Member Transition

Board seats are valuable real estate, to be used judiciously. There are costs associated with a disruptive or dominating board member but also with one who is not fully engaged or committed. This alone is an argument for sound succession planning, selection, and transitioning, as these activities get the best members in place and help them make an immediate and sustained impact.

Strategic member transitioning has a host of other advantages. The process:

- Ensures a stable board, minimizing disruptions
- Demonstrates (and models) thoughtfulness around membership, making a board seat something truly earned and valued
- Aligns board composition with the strategic needs of the organization
- Promotes an inclusive decision-making process, led by the board chair, the nominating and governance committee, and its chair
- Integrates new members quickly to increase engagement and speed time to impact

## What It Looks Like

Processes may differ, but we suggest the following essential steps for member transitions, with each step “reviewed and revised whenever there is a notable strategic update or shift for the organization.”<sup>4</sup>

1. **Before recruiting, review the board’s mandate and performance scorecard.** Consult bylaws and understand



1 Andrew Chastain and Susan Snyder, “CEO Transition: Overcoming Common Pitfalls,” *BoardRoom Press*, The Governance Institute, April 2025.

2 Corporate Board Member and RHR International, “What Makes a Great Board: A Look Inside the Boardrooms of America,” 2024.

3 KPMG, “Building a Great Board,” 2018.

4 Andrew Chastain and Susan Snyder, “Leveraging Board Succession as a Strategic Asset,” *BoardRoom Press*, The Governance Institute, December 2023.

membership requirements and governance responsibilities to ensure clarity on what the board must deliver for the organization. If there is misalignment on the board's core remit, address this before moving on to the other steps.

2. **Create or update a board leadership profile.** Ensure this document outlines all areas of expertise the board wishes to have as well as the personal qualities it seeks in its membership (innovative, mission-driven, patient-centric, etc.). Some aspects will be static while others will evolve depending on current circumstances. (See "A Snapshot of Today's Healthcare Boards.")
3. **Develop a capability matrix.** Consult the strategic plan and outline the competencies, characteristics, and experiences needed on the board—both current strengths and gaps to be filled. On a typical grid, one axis will list the range of members (chair, vice chair, etc., including unfilled roles) and the other axis will list desired capabilities, which can include demographics, industry experience, and current and prior executive roles held. Conduct an annual review of the grid to see where misalignments appear or new competencies (M&A, digital/AI, population health, public policy, etc.) must be added.
4. **Align capabilities and needs with planned turnover.** Establish clear term limits to ensure healthy, cyclical turnover that allows members with desired capabilities to come aboard. Leverage the capability matrix in the event of an unexpected departure to fill the void within the current strategic framework.
5. **Ensure bylaws and committee charters support these activities.** Review your constitutional documents to ensure alignment with your updated practices. In keeping with good governance, incorporate new practices and eliminate unused or unnecessary steps.
6. **Plan structured onboarding of new members and board alignment.** Expand onboarding to include a multifaceted approach across a new member's first year of service to shorten the learning curve, increase engagement, and maximize value. We discuss additional best practices in this article.

## A Snapshot of Today's Healthcare Boards

WittKieffer recently conducted research into the composition of today's healthcare boards.<sup>5</sup> A typical board has **15 to 18 members** with varying experiences, areas of expertise, and competencies. Broken down by industry background, most memberships look something like this:



By executive experience, a typical board composition is:



## What Gets in the Way

### Pitfall #1: Difficult Emotions

In studies of boards across industries, nearly half of board members (45 percent) think that one of their board colleagues should be replaced; a much larger proportion of executives (92 percent) believe at least one current member of their organization's board should go. The truth, most likely, is in between.<sup>6</sup> Needless to say, boards would benefit from turning over their members more than they do, whether to improve performance or to meet the need for new expertise and perspective.

Why don't boards address turnover and transition more actively? Emotional attachments and relationships within the board make it difficult to talk about and pursue turnover. The chair and board leadership may avoid hard conversations with underperforming or disengaged members, especially with those who are volunteers from the community.

If emotions and relationships are a barrier:

- Create a sound transition process, grounded in organizational strategy, that is reviewed annually. If bylaws allow it, include renomination for current board members; incumbency should not automatically result in

<sup>5</sup> WittKieffer proprietary research on the board composition at leading 50 health systems, December 2024.

<sup>6</sup> PWC, "Comparing Board and C-suite Perspectives," 2024.

another term. Having an agreed-upon process provides predictability for the board and organization, taking emotion out of the equation.

- Consider reducing term limits to lessen the emotional attachment to incumbency, with the added bonus of creating urgency around board member impact within a finite tenure.
- Discuss board succession and transition regularly, conditioning members to expect member turnover as an essential part of governance.
- Communicate clearly and consistently around board transitions, reducing the chance of surprises and hard feelings.



**The strategic opportunities and challenging headwinds facing healthcare today require the entire board to be knowledgeable, nimble, and functioning at maximum capacity as quickly as possible.**

### **Pitfall #2: Lack of Role Clarity**

Board transitions suffer when members are unsure of who does what. We recommend the following standard tasks and responsibilities:

- **Board chair:** Ensures leadership continuity as well as fairness and transparency around the transition process. The chair conducts annual board member reviews while working with the nominating and governance committee in evaluating and selecting candidates.
- **Nominating and governance committee chair:** Develops a formal board transition strategy and process. It is their duty to monitor board and committee composition, establishing objective criteria for candidate

evaluation with the board chair.

The committee chair also identifies and recruits potential board candidates and, once they join, oversees formal onboarding.

- **Full board:** Reviews recommended candidates and votes on whether to approve them.
- **CEO:** Assists in identifying potential candidates. Most CEOs will team with the board chair and nominating and governance committee in the evaluation and selection of candidates, then play a key role in welcoming new members and shepherding their onboarding process.

### **Pitfall #3: Stopping Short**

The selection of a new board member is cause to celebrate but not to rest. There is much more to do in terms of onboarding and accelerating the impact of new members. As with CEO transitions, many boards stop too early. Their onboarding likely covers fiduciary responsibilities and other basics but lacks comprehensiveness. “The most successful onboarding programs start early, are multi-faceted, and require a committed partnership and investment by the organization, the incoming board member, and the full board.”<sup>7</sup>

Effective onboarding begins before the member is formally elected and should span the first year of board service.

A well-designed, strategic onboarding includes:

- A strong pre-boarding process, sharing clear expectations, roles and responsibilities, and providing the opportunity to learn about the organization and meet other board members.
- A structured orientation process that includes a detailed overview of the organization, board operations, and enterprise risk along with self-study materials and one-on-one meetings with key executive leaders.

- Immersion opportunities for new members to gain deep and wide exposure to the organization and the board, including mentor programs, committee rotations, rounding with patients and providers, and participating in employee events.

Board members often share a belief that it takes anywhere from one to three years to feel well-versed and ready to contribute at the highest level. The strategic opportunities and challenging headwinds facing healthcare today require the entire board to be knowledgeable, nimble, and functioning at maximum capacity as quickly as possible. Onboarding practices must expand beyond traditional orientation sessions to thoughtfully integrate new members, expedite their familiarity with the inner workings, and make them feel an immediate worth.

Set up new members for growth and development, especially those new to governance. Augment their skills and experience with training opportunities. Encourage ongoing growth (for individual members and committees) through annual self-assessments, which should be discussed with the board chair. Once that becomes standard operating procedure, peer evaluation (also reviewed individually with the board chair) can be a powerful lever for change.

### **Conclusion**

Planning thoughtfully for new members, extending them a warm welcome, and investing in helping them find their footing are signs of good governance. Rather than relegating these responsibilities to the back burner, boards should embrace them as best practice and a means of keeping membership vital and impactful. By linking member transitioning to strategic goals and needs, boards and their organizations reap benefits in the here and now as well as the long term—to the benefit of their patients and communities.



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<sup>7</sup> Laura Orr, “The Need for Speed: Onboarding for Maximum Board Engagement,” The Governance Institute, *BoardRoom Press*, June 2024.