

STRATEGIC BOARD LEADERSHIP: Elevating Governance for Impact

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Article developed from real-time session insights captured by Snapsight

Effective governance does not happen by accident. At MSAE25, the session *Strategic Board Leadership: Elevating Governance for Impact* challenged association leaders to reexamine how boards show up as stewards, strategists, and partners in organizational success. Donna Oser, CAE, and Jean Jernigan, CAE, CMP, IOM, drew on decades of experience working with boards across the association sector to frame governance as a leadership discipline—one that requires clarity, accountability, and foresight.

Staying in the Right Lane: Governance vs. Management

The conversation began with a foundational reminder: governance and management are not the same. Boards are responsible for setting direction, ensuring accountability, and stewarding the organization's mission—while staff determine how that work gets done. When boards drift into operations, or staff are pulled into governance decisions, role confusion and friction quickly follow. Clear lane definition, the speakers emphasized, is essential to healthy board–staff relationships and effective decision-making.

The 3 Ds and Beyond

At the heart of board service are three well-established fiduciary duties: care, loyalty, and obedience. Oser and Jernigan urged attendees to expand that framework by embracing a fourth duty—foresight. In a rapidly changing environment, boards must look beyond current conditions to anticipate emerging risks, trends, and opportunities. Tools such as environmental scanning, and resources like ASAE's drivers of change, help boards elevate conversations from reporting to strategy.

Strategic leadership means focusing on what should happen next, rather than on what has already been done.

-The Will to Govern Well: Knowledge, Trust, and Nimbleness

Shifting the Board’s Focus From Reports to Results

Much of the session focused on practical governance discipline. Strategic boards spend their limited time making informed decisions—not collecting information. Consent agendas can streamline routine business, freeing meetings for higher-value discussions about outcomes rather than activities. Similarly, the “say it three times” approach to change management acknowledges that governance evolution takes time; repeating new expectations over several months helps boards move from resistance to readiness.

Building a Strategic Board—By Design

Board composition also emerged as a critical success factor. Effective nominations committees do more than fill vacancies. They recruit intentionally; assessing skills, perspectives, and diversity of experience needed to advance the organization. Thorough interviews and clear expectations can prevent governance challenges before they begin, strengthening board culture and performance.

Accountability Strengthens Leadership & Relationships

Accountability, the speakers noted, must extend to leadership evaluation. Regular CEO performance reviews are not optional; they protect both the executive and the organization. Avoiding evaluation often creates more risk than addressing performance through clear, respectful conversation. Likewise, ongoing board self-assessment ensures members remain aligned with strategic priorities and committed to continuous improvement.

Creating the Conditions for Strategic Impact

Ultimately, strategic governance requires discipline, clarity, and trust. When boards are supported in a way that allows them to embrace their role, prioritize the association’s long-term interests, and focus on outcomes, they create the conditions for meaningful impact.

Interested in strengthening board governance and strategic leadership within your organization? Donna Oser, CAE, can be reached at doser@msae.info, and Jean Jernigan, CAE, CMP, IOM, can be reached at jjernigan@auburnhillschamber.com.



Meet Jean & Donna

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