

“A model of governance is a framework within which to organize the thoughts, activities, structure, and relationships of governing boards.” John Carver

A good model of governance should:

1. **“Cradle” vision:** A useful framework for governance must hold and support vision in the primary position. Administrative systems cause us to devote great attention to the specifics. Such rigor, itself commendable, can overshadow the broader matter of purpose. There must be systematic encouragement to think the unthinkable and to dream.
2. **Explicitly address fundamental values:** The governing board is a guardian of organizational values. The framework must ensure that the board focuses on values. Endless decisions about events cannot substitute for deliberations and explicit pronouncements on values.
3. **Force an external focus:** Because organizations tend to focus inward, a governance model must intervene to guarantee a market-like, external responsiveness. A board would thus be more concerned with needs and markets than with the internal issues of organizational mechanics.
4. **Enable an outcome-driven organizing system:** All functions and decisions are to be rigorously weighed against the standard of purpose. A powerful model would have the board not only establish a mission in terms of an outcome, but procedurally enforce a mission as the central organizing focus.
5. **Separate large issues from small ones:** Board members usually agree that large issues deserve first claim on their time, but they have no common way to discern a big item. A model should help differentiate sizes of issues.
6. **Force forward thinking:** A governance scheme should help a board thrust the majority of its thinking into the future. Strategic leadership demands the long-term viewpoint.
7. **Enable proactivity:** So that boards do not merely preside over momentum, a model of governance should press boards toward leading and away from reacting. Such a model would engage boards more in creating than in approving.
8. **Facilitate diversity and unity:** It is important to optimize the richness of diversity in board composition and opinion, yet still assimilate the variety into one voice. A model must address the need to speak with one voice without squelching dissent or feigning unanimity.
9. **Describe relationships to relevant constituencies:** In either a legal or moral sense, boards are usually trustees. They are also, to some extent, accountable to consumers, neighbors, and staff. A model of governance should define where these various constituencies fit into the scheme.
10. **Define a common basis for discipline:** Boards have a tough time sticking to a job description, being decisive without being impulsive and keeping discussion to the point. A model of governance should provide a rational basis for a board’s self-discipline.
11. **Delineate the board’s role in common topics:** A model of governance should enable a board to articulate roles without isolating roles from each other, so the board’s specific contribution on any topic is clear.
12. **Determine what information is needed:** A model of governance would introduce more precise distinctions about the nature of information needed to govern, avoiding too much, too little, too late, and simply wrong information.
13. **Balance over-control and under-control:** It is easy to control too much or too little and, ironically, to do both at the same time. The same board can simultaneously be a “rubber-stamper” and a “meddler.” A model of governance would clarify those aspects of management that need tight versus loose control.
14. **Use board time efficiently:** Members of nonprofit and public boards receive token pay or none in exchange for their time. Though they willingly make this contribution, few have time to waste. By sorting out what really needs to be done, a model should enable boards to use the precious gift of time more productively.