



## 'Strategic Governance' for Proactive Leadership

# How to be a Board that Matters

By Larry Merrill,  
MTA Executive Director

Every community has issues needing township board leadership. What issues, in the opinion of your township board, are your township's greatest challenges?

In answering that question, you may tick off one of many possibilities from a long list of regional or local problems common to Michigan communities, such as:

- Creating jobs so our children don't have to move away to find work
- Accessibility to health care
- Preserving family farms
- Dealing with juvenile delinquency
- Availability of recreation programs
- Serving an aging population
- Development patterns altering our traditional community character
- Improving emergency response times to new residential developments
- Protecting groundwater
- Eliminating blight

Your list might mention none of these issues—or include only one or a few. You may even have been surprised at some of these suggestions that do not fall within the scope of traditional township government responsibilities. Nonetheless, if you're typical of many township officials, you likely could not have, with any real degree of assurance, accurately answered the question at all.

This inability to identify your board's priority issues has nothing to do with the keenness of your insights on your community's challenges. Instead, it is likely your township board has never dedicated time to identifying or prioritizing the "big issues" facing your community, let alone identifying strategies to improve or solve these thorniest of community challenges.

### *Barriers to Making a Difference*

There are several reasons that township boards seldom look at these "mega-issues:"

- From their very first MTA seminar, new township officials learn that township governments have only those powers and duties provided for in state law. Consequently, township officials often see their jobs as limited to focusing on issues solely related to township statutory powers.
- Often a community's biggest challenges, such as job creation or retention, result from worldwide economic and social shifts, and a single township board may feel powerless to make a meaningful impact.
- Day-to-day administrative challenges—such as settling disputes among employees or volunteers, keeping the zoning map up-to-date or adjusting to new mandates like summer tax collections or the Qualified Voter File—

occupy as much time as township officials can give to their jobs.

- A multitude of committees, workgroups and task forces established by regional planning commissions, county boards or other community groups that want township official participation take precedence over the township board's priorities.
- Micromanaging minutiae of township operations and legally mandated board activities forces a township board to spend ever-increasing amounts of time on matters of little consequence, while big issues are relegated to a lower priority.
- Political divisiveness or board factions prevent a board from agreeing on issues of common concern.
- After trying unsuccessfully to take on a few big issues, board members can become discouraged and decide to just "mind their own business."
- Another entity, such as the county road commission, a state agency or even a private entity, has authority to make the final determination.

Township boards should not shy away from trying to make a difference in their communities on matters that are exceedingly complex or challenging. After all, as elected leaders, who is in a more legitimate position to advocate on behalf of the needs of the community? Holding public office provides township officials with a mantle of credibility that will garner more media and policy-maker attention, and can instill confidence in township residents that an issue is worthy of their support.

The viability of Michigan township government in the 21st century will ultimately be determined by citizens who see their township boards as effective and accountable agents for changes that improve the quality of life in their communities, rather than merely as inert administrators of arcane government functions.

### *Leading the Community*

Leadership is forward thinking. A township board that leads the community governs strategically—the board defines, in a manner consistent with community values and expectations, the township's essential character and the township's role in ensuring that the community character is protected and enhanced. A contrast to leadership would be merely reacting to changing circumstances, ratifying staff recommendations, or limiting township activities to basic authorities and statutory duties.

Effective board leadership focuses on outcomes—what the township wants to accomplish. In smaller townships, the board usually *is* the township staff, so boards in smaller townships run a strong risk of focusing discussions on activities rather than on goals. But there is nothing to stop boards in smaller townships from operating at a strategic level if they simply discipline themselves to deliberately

focus some discussion on outcomes, goals and objectives, and save the discussion on designing a project to another time. This way, boards will not get too far ahead of themselves and can avoid "tunnel vision" that results from jumping too quickly to a specific strategy.

Strategic leadership means focusing on what needs to happen next, rather than on what's already been done. Boards need to monitor staff and volunteer activities to ensure they fit with the board's expectations and policies. Too often, governing bodies misuse staff reports as opportunities to "Monday-morning quarterback" the work of subordinates, without providing any meaningful guidance for the future.

How does a township board, accustomed to spending board meetings paying bills, hearing reports, and rubber-stamping ordinances and staff-driven policies, become a board that makes a real difference? What about the risks of an embarrassing failure? How does a board select among multiple options? How does a board choose wisely which issues to embrace?

### *Redesigning Meetings to Make a Difference*

A strategic board spends precious time using information, rather than collecting it. Board members satisfy their information needs *before* meetings, rather than spending board time asking questions that could have been resolved prior to the meeting. All questions aren't bad—in fact, questioning those who manage a project or program to ensure that it is meeting objectives and is being conducted in line with board-established parameters is an essential role of government. Inappropriate questions that waste board time are questions that cover

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**Effective board leadership means focusing on outcomes—what the township wants to accomplish.**



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information already provided in written reports that board members didn't read in preparation for the meeting, and questions that shed no illumination on what the board needs to resolve. Instead of spending an inordinate amount of board time reviewing what has already been done, the board

should determine what needs to be done next.

To function strategically, most boards will have to re-engineer their board agendas. Routine, uncontroversial agenda items that require board action to satisfy legal requirements or that are primarily symbolic in nature should be diverted to a consent agenda so they do not distract the board from more important matters. While the board may not be able to dispose of all mundane matters, unimportant issues can be put at the end of the agenda. It is human nature to spend the most time and attention on whatever is first on the agenda.

In larger townships, there can be a tendency to build board meetings around reacting to staff proposals and ratifying work plans that originated below the board level. Without abdicating its proper oversight role, boards in larger townships might consider governing through goal-setting and explicitly defining unacceptable staff activities, rather than requiring board approval of every staff initiative.

Strategic agenda items can be framed as open-ended questions that focus on big issues previously identified by the board as having critical importance to the community's quality of life. Background information is collected and disseminated before the meeting by staff or board members who take a strong interest in the issue. Strategic boards set aside time on agendas for the board to hold a dialogue on the issue, with all board members sharing what they know about the issue. At this stage of dialogue, judgment and solutions are set aside for a later time. Opinions are subordinate to facts.

Big issues are framed as questions that cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." They are issues that require thought, are usually complex, and are not

resolved by opinion but require a command of background information and facts. They begin with phrases like, "How can we ...", "What should the township's role be ..." or "How can we most effectively address ...".

### *Resisting the Quick Solution*

Sometimes townships tackle a big issue through one or two members who recognize a challenge selling the township board on the need to become involved. It is not unusual for the majority of the board to remain passive, while a few members use the board's position as a "bully pulpit" to exert influence on the issue. However, in this scenario, the potential impact that a fully committed board could bring remains unrealized. When a position is taken without thorough research, the board can damage its credibility. And, by seizing the first issue that comes along, the board's attention can become diverted from other, more significant issues, inordinate resources are directed at a matter of temporary importance or toward a concern on which the township will be unable to exert any real influence.

It is also human nature to seize on the first apparently reasonable solution presented. What may at first glance be an acceptable course of action may not turn out to be the best strategy. A little more time studying the issue might reveal insights that could avoid missteps.

Boards that want to be change agents to improve the quality of life in their townships will need to approach big issues in a systematic, strategic manner. It has long been said that government needs to run more like businesses. The private sector's strategic planning model can be adopted by governmental entities to serve as a strategic governance model for critical thinking and decision-making in townships.

Township boards make too many routine decisions attempting to subject every issue to a rigorous strategic governance process. Nonetheless, applying the following strategic governance process to decision-making may be appropriate when an issue has one or more of the following characteristics:

- Multiple options from which to choose
- A consensus on the board will not easily emerge
- High risks, visibility and costs
- Community support is necessary to achieve success
- There is time to proceed deliberately and strategically, rather than reacting in a crisis environment

### *Strategic Governance is Goal-Driven*

Strategic governance can be applied to a limited set of major problems or issues simultaneously, such as 10 or 12 "mega-issues" that establish a foundation on which to develop a comprehensive long-range plan. A township board that strives to act strategically—rather than in an

uncoordinated way—on major issues responds to changes in its environment based on predetermined goals. Goals are not the same as programs and services. Goals are what the township board wants to accomplish. Goal statements should be limited to what the township board can reasonably accomplish within its current and potential resources. Goals:

- Seek optimal benefits for township residents
- Pursue the greatest possible advantage of opportunities
- Build a unique community identity for residents' benefit
- Build on the strengths of the township government organization
- Build up township government weaknesses

### *Applying Strategic Governance*

Township officials need to ask four key questions related to any problem or issue they face:

1. *What do we know about our constituents—their needs, wants and preferences—that are relevant to this decision?*

To the greatest extent possible, township officials should speak of constituents from a position of knowledge, rather than opinion. How do township officials know what their constituents really want and need? They ask them! Surveys, charrettes, forums, town meetings and public hearings are some of the ways to solicit input.

2. *What do we know about legal parameters and requirements relevant to this decision?*

Your township attorney or MTA's Member Information Department can identify legal implications, such as what the

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**Too often governing bodies misuse staff reports as opportunities to “Monday-morning quarterback” the work of subordinates, without providing any meaningful guidance for the future.**

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township can and cannot spend township money on, issues of conflict of interest, and other statutory prohibitions or requirements.

3. *What do we know about the resources available to the township to address this issue, and the township's ability to marshal those resources efficiently and effectively?*

If township money will be expended, the board should consider whether the expenses will be limited in duration—in which case the fund balance needs to be examined to ensure that reserves will not be drawn down to dangerous levels. If the township treasury will absorb the costs on an ongoing basis, are current revenue streams expanding sufficiently to cover costs? Can current spending on existing programs be curtailed or reallocated to address the issue at hand? Would the voters approve a new resource such as a tax increase?

Creative boards do not let the size of its treasury or staffing levels create hard and fixed boundaries on what it considers to be possible. Creative boards identify new revenue streams, and reach out to community residents for financial support and/or volunteers. If the township board has accurately identified unmet needs that reflect community perceptions, it will not be difficult to marshal additional resources from taxpayers and other residents.

Still, boards have to consider if there is sufficient administrative support to oversee and manage a project, whether board and staff have the training and expertise

**A strategic board spends precious time using information, rather than collecting it.**



to take on new responsibilities, and if the project creates an unacceptable level of legal risk to the township.

4. *What are the ethical implications of our choices?*

Do the benefits of any of our choices apply, to an inappropriate degree, to members of the township board? Will the benefits be fairly applied to township residents and other groups?

### *Knowledge Over Opinion*

Unless board members have background materials to study prior to a meeting, board discussion will likely be a lackluster exchange of opinions. A board or staff member needs to collect information that will elevate discussion to an illumination of facts. This will likely require framing the issue with input from key stakeholders who will be impacted by potential action, or who have information or ideas on the issue.

Listing where information might be available can aid in developing balanced and helpful background information. From discussions with experts or other informed stakeholders, it may be beneficial to draft some insights that capture perceptions and key elements that will lead to quality decision-making. The person drafting these insights should function as an “honest broker” of information, to avoid leading the board in a direction it would not choose if it had sufficiently balanced information available. Insights should be based on the needs and wishes of constituents, relevant laws, legal cases and attorney general opinions, financial and human resources, and ethical implications.

Background information should be summarized in brief bulleted insights, making them relatively simple, clear and easily retrieved in the ensuing discussions. It

- Politics
- Community values

Relative to the discussion issue, the board should explore its capabilities to make a meaningful impact on external issues affecting the community. Also of critical importance is a fair assessment of the township's internal capacity—fiscal and human resources, administrative capacity, competencies and intellectual assets.

### *Identifying Options*

After engaging in dialogue that informs all board members on the issue, board discussion moves on to identifying choices. Flip charts or grease boards can be used to record potential activities, solutions or options. Board members should avoid sorting or criticizing choices until the board has exhausted itself of all proposals. Too often, finding fault in each idea as it surfaces poisons the nurturing environment necessary to encourage board members in expressing their ideas. Reserve judgment until all choices have been identified.

Core questions in identifying choices are:

- What could we do regarding this issue?
- What strategies could we use?
- Are there alternatives or choices among the strategies we have identified in formulating our response to this issue?

### *Analyzing the Choices*

When no additional ideas are likely to come forward, the board evaluates which choices are best. Creative board members may see opportunities to combine elements of different proposals, or other strategies that can improve on an idea. Most choices offer their own distinct mixture of advantages and disadvantages. Choices that just don't make sense—too expensive, beyond the resources available, questionable legality, politically unacceptable to the community—can be dispatched so the board can focus on choices that have some potential for success.

The board discusses the narrowed-down choices to try to reach a consensus. If one is not reached, the board might need to identify additional information that could help it choose a course of action acceptable to all members. It's okay to postpone a decision to a later meeting if additional reflection, dialogue or information will move the board to a choice acceptable to each member. However, if the likelihood of consensus is minimal and a majority of the board is prepared to move forward, then the board is faced with the question of moving ahead, knowing that the degree to which all members are not solidly behind the choice could undermine its success.

If a minority of the board has the capability and will to "sabotage" success by undercutting public support, or

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the absence of a united board sends a mixed message to the community, the board may need to reconsider the wisdom of proceeding. At minimum, it may need to develop additional strategies to address any problems objectors might cause. If the objectors merely want to stay on the fence and will not actively oppose the choice, or are without credibility, the board will likely proceed without reaching a consensus.

### *Identifying Actions, Intent and Accountability*

Once a choice is selected, the board's work is not quite done. There will likely emerge from these discussions implications for the board, and affected staff and workgroups. Even if the board is solidly behind a particular course of action, there will likely be quite a few qualifiers: "We'll do this only if this happens," "We can't spend any more money than 'X' dollars," or "If we encounter this problem, we'll make these changes."

From the choice selected, the board will need to discern what actions are suggested, especially the all-important question, "Who needs to do what?" The board must identify who is responsible in seeing that the actions are appropriately carried out. All of the board's "worry points" should be identified, along with the specific actions the board wants done. A clear statement of intent and who will be held accountable for proceeding in accordance with board direction should also be drafted for board ratification.

### *Crafting a Motion or Resolution*

The board now gets on familiar ground in the strategic process in crafting a motion or resolution. A board resolution will provide, in the section that begins "whereas," the key discussion points raised in the board's initial dialogue. The resolution preamble identifies the problem, and states the board's intention to resolve the issue.

The resolution should provide, in the section that begins "be it resolved," the action that the board expects

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to be carried out. This should also include direction, clarification and broad policy that reflect the will of the board. Following a series of “be it further resolved,” the board includes any guidelines, parameters, boundaries or other statements reflecting its intent on the issue.

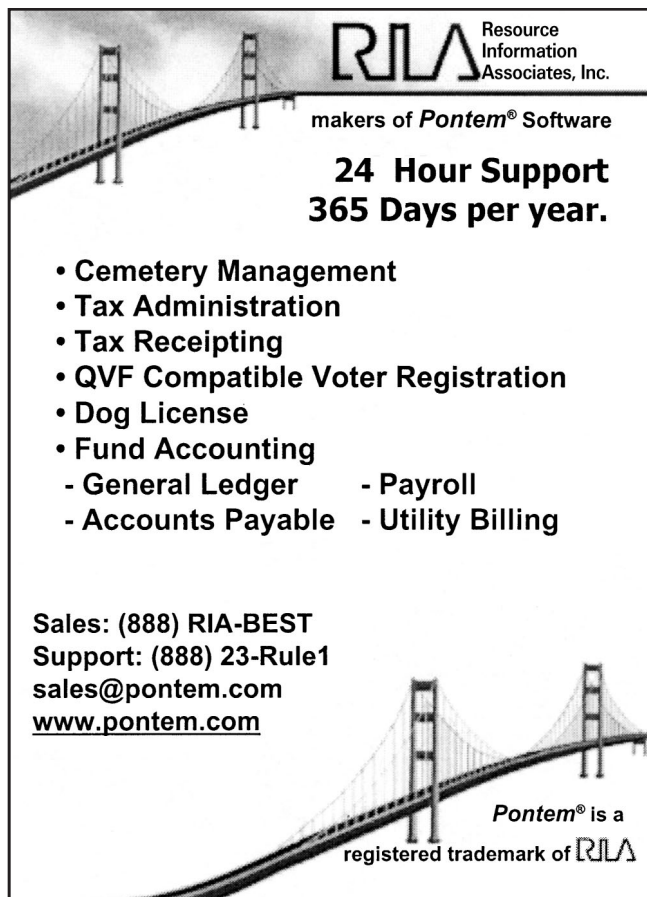
The board then deliberates and votes on the motion or resolution, according to its traditional process.

### Strategic Governance Limitations

Not every issue a board addresses is sufficiently complex to warrant such a systematic analysis. Boards have limited time, and for many issues facing a township, a “satisfactory” or even cursory evaluation and decision-making process will do. But, a township board that truly wants to make a difference to the community will not be content to merely pick the “low-hanging fruit” represented by issues that are quickly and easily dispatched, or tackle only those problems for which a single solution is readily apparent.

Strategic governance is a tool for the township board that strives for uncommon leadership—a tool for uncommon problems that require uncommon solutions. ■

If your board would like to learn more about strategic governance, check out MTA's Township Governance Academy at: [www.michigantownships.org](http://www.michigantownships.org), or call the MTA Education Center at (517) 321-6467.



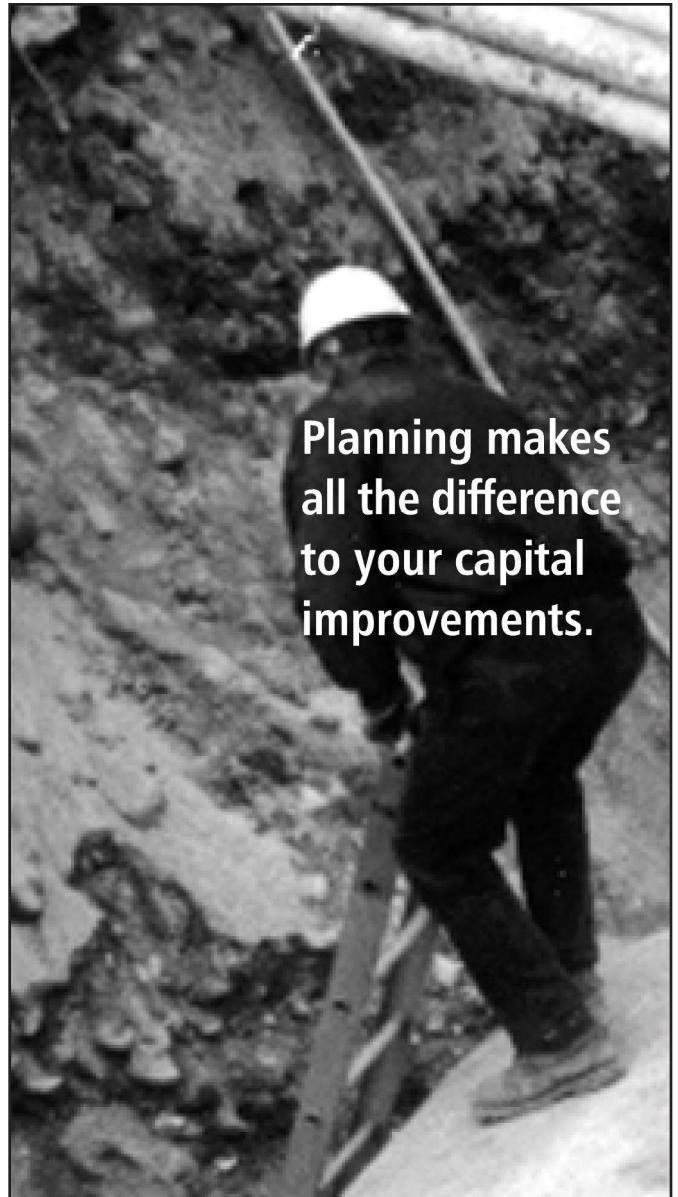
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## Continuing Education Self-Assessment

Participants enrolled in the Township Governance Academy (TGA), a credentialing program offered through the Michigan Townships Association, may obtain 2.0 elective credits for successful completion of this quiz. To obtain credit, participants must answer the following 10 multiple-choice questions by circling the correct answer and receive a passing score of 70 percent. The questions are based on content from the article, "How to Be a Board that Matters," beginning on page 10. You may also take the quiz online by going to: [www.michigantownships.org/tga.htm](http://www.michigantownships.org/tga.htm)

There is no charge to take the quiz or to obtain TGA credit. Township officials interested in enrolling in the Township Governance Academy may call Jennifer Gorchow, MTA education specialist, at (517) 321-6467, ext. 247, for more information.

Completed quizzes should be sent to: MTA Education Center, 512 Westshire Drive, Lansing, MI 48917, or faxed to (517) 321-8908. MTA will notify you of your results within three weeks after receiving your quiz. **IMPORTANT:** *Please keep a copy of your completed quiz in your TGA binder.*

### TGA Continuing Education—September 2004

#### "How to be a Board that Matters"

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*(To receive credit, this quiz must be completed by October 1, 2007.)*

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**1. The major reason township boards are unable to identify their board's priority issues is because:**

- a. of disagreement among board members as to what the issues actually are
- b. it's not a statutory requirement
- c. there is not enough money to deal with matters other than those mandated by law
- d. the board has not invested any time in identifying or prioritizing the big issues facing their community

**2. Which of the following is NOT true of the strategic governance process:**

- a. it can be applied to a limited set of "mega-issues" simultaneously
- b. it provides quick solutions to problems facing the township
- c. it relies on facts more than opinions
- d. it frames strategic agenda items as open-ended questions

**3. Strategic leadership focuses on:**

- a. what needs to happen next rather than on what has been done
- b. selecting an insightful board member to direct the board meeting
- c. setting time limits for achieving desired outcomes
- d. hearing board reports

**4. The types of issues that benefit most from the strategic governance process are those that:**

- a. are routine and non-controversial
- b. do not require community support to achieve success
- c. have high risks, visibility and costs
- d. garner the most attention from the media

**5. Which of the following is NOT a role of a strategic board:**

- a. ensuring that programs and projects meet objectives
- b. focusing on matters for which solutions are readily apparent and easily dispatched
- c. becoming knowledgeable about issues on the agenda prior to the board meeting
- d. monitoring that policies are being administered within board-established parameters

**6. Strategic governance is goal-driven, which means that the board:**

- a. creates programs and services
- b. works with a third-party to determine the township's goals
- c. decides what it can afford to do based on its current resources
- d. responds to changes in its environment based on the township's predetermined goals

**7. Which of the following statements is true?**

- a. the township supervisor should initiate and oversee the strategic governance process
- b. when exploring options to address an issue, it is best to eliminate impractical ideas as they arise
- c. a strategic board spends more time using information than collecting it
- d. the private sector's strategic planning model is not applicable to townships

**8. Which of the following questions does NOT have to be answered when the board addresses an issue, and in fact, could even be detrimental to the discussion process?**

- a. What do we know about the length of time it will take for the board to make a decision?

- b. What do we know about the resources available to the township and the township's ability to marshal those resources?
- c. What do we know about the legal requirements and ethical implications relative to this decision?
- d. What do we know about our constituents' needs, wants and preferences?

**9. If a consensus does not emerge after the board identifies options and analyzes the choices that have been identified on an issue, the next step is to:**

- a. agree to gather more information about the subject and take up the issue at a subsequent meeting
- b. proceed forward without reaching a consensus
- c. either (a) or (b), depending on the situation and issue at hand
- d. none of the above

**10. Which of the following statements best characterizes effective board leadership:**

- a. it is procedural, focused on addressing business matters more efficiently
- b. it is hierarchical in structure, with an appointed spokesperson
- c. it is forward-thinking, focused on outcomes and driven by facts
- d. it is fast-paced, situational and based on group directives