



SITUATION

The Wikimedia Foundation is the nonprofit organization that hosts the free and open online encyclopedia Wikipedia. Wikipedia is made possible by a global community of more than 200,000 volunteer contributors, billions of readers and donors. The site provides unlimited access to reliable information freely available to anyone and has become the 5th most-visited website in the world.

CHALLENGES

The Wikimedia Foundation is governed by a board of trustees with nine members (including the founder) from countries around the world. Each member has a varying degree of connectedness to the established Wikipedia editorial community, or “Wikipedians” ranging from full participation to relative unfamiliarity. The board sought more efficient and effective ways to fulfill its governance responsibilities. At the same time, the Foundation executive director was exploring ways to leverage the board to better fulfill its mission and vision while ensuring the continued success of Wikipedia.

Information gleaned from the Board Self-Assessment and discussion from our one-on-one interviews with trustees and members of the Wikipedia Community indicated a great deal of dissatisfaction with the status quo

Board Veritas Asked

- Are the right people doing the right things at the right time?
- Are you executing the strategic plan?
- Is the executive director leading the organization effectively?
- Is the board a strategic partner to management?
- Are you exploiting opportunities to advance your mission and vision?
- Are you managing risks effectively?

Through an initial board self-assessment and benchmarking against industry standards, Board Veritas determined the leadership and trustee’s level of self-awareness and gathered insights into the language and cultural barriers that affect the organization. Interviews conducted with trustees and leadership uncovered a lack of alignment in key functional areas of the board.

Board Veritas counseled the board to act with a sense of urgency regarding the findings addressed in our governance audit.

Further, roles and responsibilities were not well understood among the board, nor between the board and staff regarding strategy, decision-making and accountability (delegation of authority). This same ambiguity existed between the board and executive director, which hampered trust and impeded communication within Wikimedia.

IMPACT

Board Veritas asked the difficult, trying, and truthful questions. We made people step outside their space of comfort. We pointed out the fact that the global community that makes Wikipedia the industry cornerstone for online information also challenged the cohesiveness of the Wikimedia Foundation board of trustees.

The Wikimedia Foundation board adopted multiple resolutions to get started on implementing the prioritized recommendations from Board Veritas' report

A board formed Task Force focused on how and whether the existing governance model could service the mission of both the Foundation and Wikimedia community. Trustees have the knowledge, experience and expertise to contribute to the success of the organization, but they come from diverse countries with unique cultural values and expectations. Board Veritas recommended modifications to the board recruitment and orientation process to align candidates with needed knowledge and skill sets. Organizations with this level of complexity, reputation and structure require trustees who have sophisticated business knowledge, acumen and a critical understanding of executive leadership to best understand the nature and requirements of the chief executive role and be a strong partner to the CEO.

Based on a Board Veritas recommendation, Wikimedia Trustees authorized the creation of a full-time Board Liaison position

The board began to listen to and heed differences of opinion, unique vantage points, and asked deep, informed questions to cultivate strong collective wisdom. Without a culture of inquiry, the board risks groupthink, disengagement and poor decision-making. Additionally, board more clearly defined the executive director role and established measurable job performance and evaluation metrics. They now work with the executive director to set annual goals for programmatic areas. This includes the criteria, methods and timeline the board will use each year to fulfill its oversight role, to ensure the executive director receives constructive feedback and recognition for the success of the organization. Furthermore, the board and executive director acknowledged the imperative of succession planning.

Our Method

- Board self-assessment
- Interviews of board members and Executive Director
- Provide observations and benchmark against best practices
- Identify priority areas for improvement
- Provide recommendations to address issues

CONCLUSION

Board Veritas conducted a thorough governance audit, resulting in a series of eleven actionable recommendations. This process, coupled with the dialogue it evoked and the strategies suggested in the final report, helped the Foundation work towards a greater alignment of strategy, goals, and purpose. This synergy provided immediate advantage, fostering a clearer sense of timely focus and a renewed sense of trust among and for leaders to move Wikipedia in the right direction. The result is an organization that focuses less on deciding what to do—and more on getting things done.