

February 2026

Leveraging and Balancing Your Governing and Volunteer Horsepower

(7 minutes to read, 7 minutes to reflect, 1 minute to take a micro action)

Briefing
#9

Introduction: Balancing Control and Performance

While working with an exceptional Utah-based nonprofit that mobilizes the statewide building community to build or refurbish environments that directly serve people experiencing (or at risk of) homelessness, one theme keeps surfacing:

Balancing governance with operational horsepower.

Too often, purpose-driven organizations with grand missions struggle to strike the right balance between keeping the organization in check while unleashing the reservoir of talent within their board, committees, and volunteers—each eager to make a meaningful difference.

The mission may be dialed in. The plan may be set. Momentum may be strong. Yet its governance and committee system might still be:

- **fuzzy instead of accountable, or**
- **heavy instead of useful, or**
- **present in structure but missing in action**

Your board, committees, and volunteers are supposed to be your capacity multiplier—your mission horsepower. But horsepower doesn't appear automatically when people raise their hands to help. It appears when you define boundaries, clarify roles, communicate expectations, and assign meaningful responsibilities—each accountable for defined and intentional outcomes.

The Central Tension and Paradox to Hold with Intent

Keeping the boat safe while making the boat move. High-performing organizations honor two truths at the same time:

1. **Governing leaders protect the organization:** Board members who accept fiduciary responsibility bring enormous value. They help keep the organization in check. They steward resources. They ask the hard questions. They watch for drift. They uphold the duties of care, loyalty, obedience, and good faith. They help the CEO/Executive Director steer with clarity and integrity.

This is the control function—necessary, stabilizing, mission-protecting, empowering, and let's not forget strategically generative.

2. **Committees and volunteers extend the organization:** But many organizations—especially those with lean staff—struggle to deliver on the mission without committees and volunteers doing real work. Committees and volunteers expand expertise, offer broader networks, increase creative capacity, and multiply the hands available to perform the defined tasks the organization truly needs.



This is the performance function—capacity-expanding, traction-producing, and mission-advancing.

When these two functions are confused, poorly calibrated, or misaligned, you get a noisy system and predictable pain:

- **Volunteers sit in meetings, unclear on how to bring value**
- **Staff spend more time servicing committees than being helped by them**
- **Board members micromanage operations because “someone has to”**
- **Committees overstep because “we’re trying to help”**
- **Outcomes stall because nobody owns deliverables**

The win is not choosing one side. The win is building a system where governance keeps you safe while volunteers make you move.

A Simple Diagnostic: the Control x Performance 2x2

Use this 2x2 to quickly locate your current operating reality. Your aim is the top-right quadrant: high governance clarity and high operational horsepower.

Quadrant 1: low governance + low horsepower = Drift

- **The mission is noble, but the system wanders**
- **Outcomes drift and accountability is unclear**

Quadrant 2: high governance + low horsepower = Overcontrol

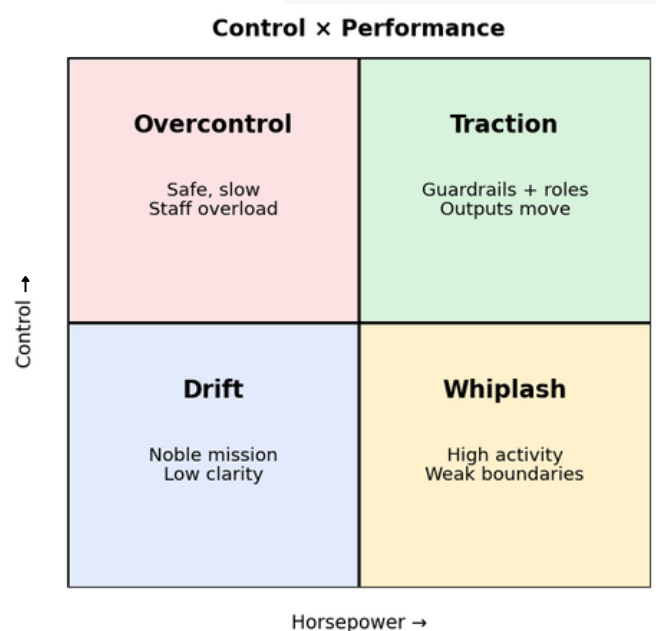
- **Oversight is strong, but execution is slow**
- **Staff carries too much load, and traction stalls**

Quadrant 3: low governance + high horsepower = Whiplash

- **Lots of activity, but unclear boundaries**
- **Inconsistent decisions and avoidable risk**

Quadrant 4: high governance + high horsepower = Traction

- **Clear guardrails and clear roles**
- **Volunteers extend staff capacity through defined outputs**
- **The system is both safe and fast**



Diagnostic question: where are you today, and what is one change that moves you one quadrant closer to Traction?

A Simple Operating Principle: Treat Volunteer Roles Like Real Roles

A volunteer isn’t “free.” A volunteer provides high-value discretionary energy—the best kind of energy.

When people choose to donate their time and expertise, they’re giving you something rare: discretionary effort, discretionary time, and often discretionary resources—all because they believe in what you’re building.

Yet it takes thoughtful leadership to convert that energy into meaningful outputs. It's a mutual investment to make them fully operational.

That belief deserves structure and attention. It's an investment on your part—and it's worth optimizing.

Even if someone is unpaid, if they're on your boat, they should know:

- **Where they fit**
- **Why they fit**
- **What they're responsible for**
- **What "good" looks like**
- **How their work connects to the mission and the plan**
- **How progress will be tracked**
- **Who they coordinate with, and how decisions get made**

The best leaders don't "fill committees." They design roles and match people to them—based on skills, experience, and motivation—just like hiring.

A Clean Distinction You Can Use Immediately

Keep it simple:

Governing roles = oversight, integrity, direction, stewardship

- Protect the mission and the organization
- Set direction, approve strategy, ensure accountability
- Guardrails: duty of care, duty of loyalty, duty of obedience, duty of good faith
- Evaluate the CEO/ED and ensure organizational health

Horsepower roles = deliverables, projects, capacity extension

- Produce defined outputs, committees and staff need
- Expand reach, relationships, expertise, and execution capacity
- Operate within clear boundaries and decision rights
- Make the mission move

If you can say in one sentence what the board governs—and what committees and volunteers build—you're ahead of most organizations.

7-Minute Strategic Pit Stop: Reflective Questions

A. Governance clarity

1. Our board's role is explicit: governance and stewardship, not day-to-day management.
2. Board members understand their fiduciary duties and take them seriously.
3. Board meetings spend most time on direction, oversight, risk, and strategic performance—not operational weeds.
4. The CEO/ED and committees have clear authority to run operations within board-approved guardrails.
5. When board members help, it is structured through a defined role—not informal side channels.

B. Horsepower clarity

1. Every committee exists for a reason that can be stated in one sentence.
2. Every committee has 1–3 defined outcomes for the year (deliverables, not discussions).
3. Each committee has clear boundaries: what it decides, recommends, and executes.
4. Each committee member knows what is expected (time, work, standards, and follow-through).
5. Volunteer work measurably reduces staff burden or increases mission traction.

C. Fit and accountability

1. We place people based on strengths and value-add, not just checking boxes.
2. Committee chairs are selected and coached like leaders—not just appointed and hoped for the best.
3. Staff liaisons know how to leverage volunteers without being consumed by them.
4. We track volunteer output the same way we track staff output (lightly, but clearly).
5. Underperforming volunteer roles get addressed respectfully and directly.

Interpretation: What Your Score Is Telling You

- If A is low: you have governance drift (either too hands-off or too hands-on).
- If B is low: you have committee fog (busy energy without traction).
- If C is low: you have a placement/accountability problem (great people, wrong roles—or no standards).

1-Minute Micro Action: The Role Card Reset

Choose one committee (or one volunteer role) that matters this quarter.
Create a one-page Role Card and send it to the chair today.

Role Card (copy/paste template)

- | | |
|---|--|
| • Purpose (one sentence): | • Success definition (what “done well” looks like): |
| • Outputs due this quarter (3 bullets): | • Time expectation (monthly hours + meeting cadence): |
| • Decision rights (decide / recommend / execute): | • First next step (one action with a date): |
| • Who you coordinate with (chair, staff liaison, board sponsor if relevant): | |

In Closing

Your organization doesn't need more committees. It needs a clearer architecture for contribution.

When governance is crisp, the organization stays in integrity.

When volunteer roles are real, the organization gains horsepower.

And when you balance control with performance, your strategy stops being a document—and starts becoming movement.

More to come...

Sincerely,



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