



NAVIGATING GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES IN GOLF CLUBS

A 2025 Perspective

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	3
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY & TERMINOLOGY.....	4
CLUB LISTING.....	5
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS	6
KEY GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES	8
Governance Effectiveness: understanding the role.....	9
Governance Effectiveness: working as a team	10
Financial Sustainability & Capital Planning.....	12
Board Skills, Leadership & Succession Planning	13
Strategy, Execution & Risk.....	15

INTRODUCTION

At Golf Business Advisory Services (GBAS), we have assisted golf clubs in preparing strategic plans and to benchmark and improve their performance for over 10 years.

Throughout this time, we have found that one of the main enablers of superior long-term planning and performance management is superior governance and board effectiveness. Conversely, we have also found that one of the biggest impediments to good planning and performance management has been poor governance and board performance.

Realising how important good governance is to effective planning, we partnered with Board Surveys in 2024 to measure and help improve the governance and effectiveness of golf club boards in Australia.

This annual research is an important component of our goal to contribute to a measurable improvement in the governance of golf clubs in Australia.

A big thank you to the 261 captains, presidents and other directors (2024 - 56) and 93 GMs/CEOs (2024 - 67) from the 93 golf clubs listed on page 5 (2024 - 67), for their input into this important research. This was a significant increase in those who contributed to our research.

The main takeaways from our 2025 research, once again conducted using the survey items IP of Board Surveys, includes that:

- › Governance and effectiveness of golf club boards is poorer than similar sized not-for-profit organisations, due mainly because:
 - › Golf club directors have a lesser appreciation of their role and how it differs from management; and
 - › The relationships and dynamics of golf club boards are inferior to that of other similar not-for-profits;
- › The effectiveness of boards appears to have deteriorated since our research in 2024, albeit based on a significantly larger sample size this year; and
- › GMs are more negative than directors in relation to the effectiveness of their club's board, including in relation to the above two matters.

Given the annual programmed turnover in boardrooms, where the GM thus becomes the constant, it is critically important for golf club boards to be more in tune with the views of their GM.

One of the biggest challenges for golf clubs is to develop an appropriate capital plan to ensure their long-term sustainability and viability. Most clubs do not appreciate the importance of long-term capital planning and/or have not executed it well in the past.

This report sets out more detail in relation to the above and other findings and provides advice and tips for golf club directors and GMs to navigate their governance challenges ahead.

Because good governance makes everything better, we commend the board surveys and governance programs referred to later in this report.

We trust this important industry research will help you on your governance and board effectiveness improvement journey and we look forward to assisting you on that journey.



Jeff Blunden
Managing Director
GBAS

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY & TERMINOLOGY

The research for this report was undertaken by Golf Business Advisory Services (GBAS) between December 2024 and February 2025 using the research IP of Board Surveys.

It sought opinions from club GMs and CEOs (referred to as GMs) and from club directors on matters impacting the effectiveness of their respective club's board. Survey statements were rated, and written comments were also made.

261 directors and 93 GMs responded to an online survey sent by GBAS. The survey statements are the intellectual property of Board Surveys. This has enabled Board Surveys to directly compare responses from directors and GMs to those in its wider research database.

Respondents rated the survey statements on a 1 to 7 point Likert scale where 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = slightly disagree, 4 = neither agree or disagree, 5 = slightly agree, 6 = agree and 7 = strongly agree.

To simplify the way the results are presented in this report, we have combined survey responses into three categories as shown below. This classification also enables the ratings, by GMs and chairs to the survey statements, to be benchmarked against other small and medium not-for-profits (NFPs).



Disagree

Strongly disagree (1)
Disagree (2)
Slightly disagree (3)



Neutral

Neither agree nor disagree (4)
Slightly agree (5)



Agree

Agree (6)
Strongly agree (7)

In completing the survey, respondents were also asked to provide written comments on the biggest governance challenges being faced by their club.

Terminology

In this report, the governing body of a golf club is referred to as a board (not committee) and its members are referred to as directors (not committee members). Committees of the board are referred to as board committees or just committees (not sub-committees). The chair of the board has been referred to as the chair (not president/captain or committee chair). GMs and CEOs have been referred to as GMs in this report.



CLUB LISTING

We thank the following 93 clubs for their participation in, and contribution to, this important research.

Anglesea	Hawks Nest	Nelson Bay	Sanctuary Lakes
Avondale	Headland	New South Wales	Sandhurst Club
Barwon Heads	Huntingdale	Newcastle	Sorrento
Bonnie Doon	Indooroopilly	Noosa	Southern
Brisbane	Keperra	North Shore, NZ	Southport
Burleigh	Kew	Northern	Spring Valley
Busselton	Keysborough	Nudgee	St Michaels
Byron Bay	Kiama	Oatlands	Tea Tree Gully
Cairns	Kingston Heath	Ocean Shores	The Australian
Castle Hill	Koorlingal	Patterson River	The Coast
Cheltenham	Kooyonga	Pennant Hills	The Grange
Churchill-Waverley	Lakelands	Portsea	The Lakes
Commonwealth	Latrobe	Pymble	Thirteenth Beach Golf Links
Concord	Liverpool	Remuera, NZ	Toowoomba
Cromer	Long Reef	Rich River	Victoria
Cumberland	Lonsdale Links	Roseville	Wakehurst
Devil Bend	Manly	Royal Adelaide	Western Australian
Duntryleague	Maroochy River	Royal Canberra	Woodlands
Eastlake	Metropolitan	Royal Melbourne	Wynnum
Elanora	Mollymook	Royal Perth	Wyong
Federal	Monash CC	Royal Queensland	Yarra Yarra
Forster-Tuncurry	Mt Coolum	Royal Sydney	
Gosnells	Mt Lawley	Ryde Parramatta	
Green Acres	Mt Osmond	Sanctuary Cove	

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Compared to our 2024 research, with over 200 additional responses received from directors, there is an increasing share who believe they aren't effective as a board. GM views were largely unchanged.

Specifically, directors currently view their overall performance (ranked as the 31st percentile) as below the benchmarks of Board Surveys from other NFPs.

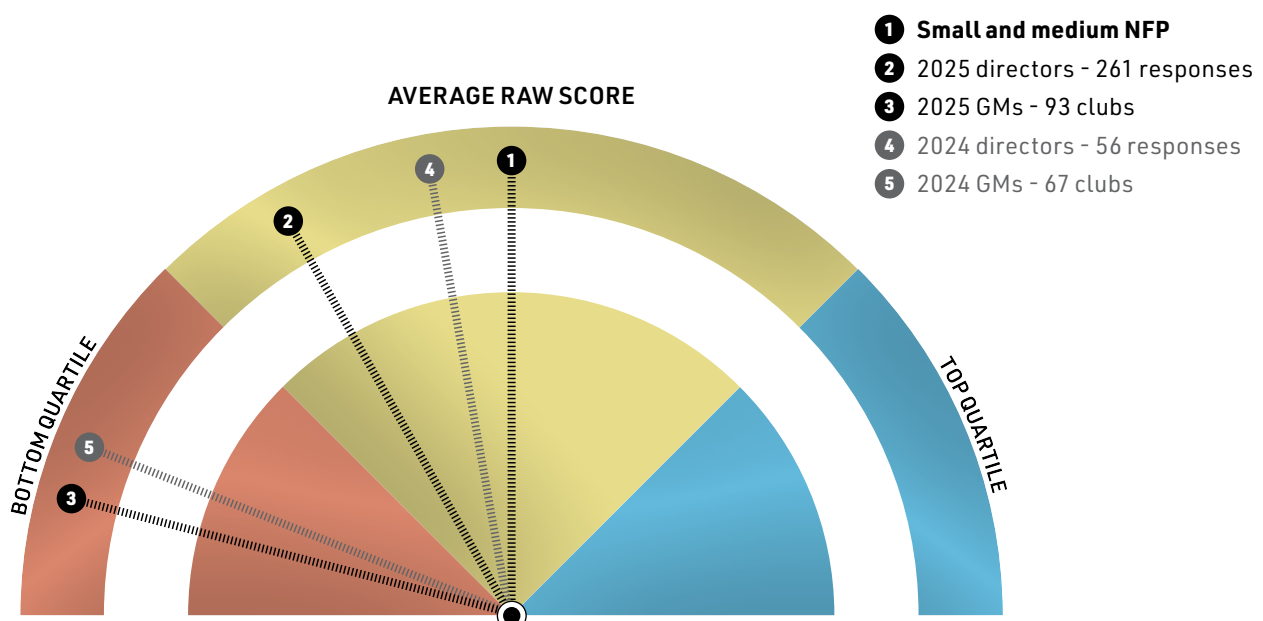
Using a different lens to define the effectiveness of their club's board, the views of GMs of the board's overall performance was below the 15th percentile, a significantly more negative view than that held by directors. This gap in opinion is similar to the findings in our 2024 research and will be further explored in this report.

Benchmarking of the overall responses of directors and GMs is shown below.

GMs Overall, the board is effective.	2024	15%	24%	61%
	2025	16%	23%	61%
DIRECTORS Overall, the board is effective.	2024	4%	7%	89%
	2025	6%	21%	73%

Responses legend:

- Disagree: Strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), slightly disagree (3)
- Neutral: Neither agree nor disagree (4), Slightly agree (5)
- Agree: Agree (6), Strongly agree (7)



Statement results & benchmarks

The following table summarises the survey ratings made by chairs and GMs to the survey statements set out below. The benchmarking compares the average responses of chairs and GMs to Board Surveys' benchmark of other small to medium NFP organisations, as surveyed by Board Surveys.

Survey item		Responses	Benchmark
Appropriate action would be/is taken to address any individual director issues (i.e. unsatisfactory commitment or performance, or undesirable or questionable behaviour).	GMs	<div><div>29%</div><div>24%</div><div>47%</div></div>	<div></div>
	Directors	<div><div>14%</div><div>26%</div><div>59%</div></div>	<div></div>
The board works constructively as a team (it has a collegial and productive working relationship that fosters trust and respect).	GMs	<div><div>23%</div><div>20%</div><div>57%</div></div>	<div></div>
	Directors	<div><div>13%</div><div>19%</div><div>68%</div></div>	<div></div>
Directors demonstrate a clear understanding of their role including how it differs from the role of management.	GMs	<div><div>24%</div><div>13%</div><div>63%</div></div>	<div></div>
	Directors	<div><div>13%</div><div>12%</div><div>75%</div></div>	<div></div>
There was no measurable disruption to the smooth operations of the board following the change of director following our last AGM.	GMs	<div><div>24%</div><div>13%</div><div>63%</div></div>	N/a
	Directors	<div><div>13%</div><div>12%</div><div>75%</div></div>	N/a
The board adds value to the organisation (including to its performance, sustainability and reputation).	GMs	<div><div>14%</div><div>24%</div><div>62%</div></div>	<div></div>
	Directors	<div><div>3%</div><div>14%</div><div>83%</div></div>	<div></div>
The board and management have an effective working relationship (i.e. collegial, respectful and with an independence of thought).	GMs	<div><div>10%</div><div>22%</div><div>69%</div></div>	<div></div>
	Directors	<div><div>7%</div><div>15%</div><div>78%</div></div>	<div></div>
The chair has a constructive working relationship with the CEO/GM (supportive and collaborative, yet independent).	GMs	<div><div>8%</div><div>12%</div><div>81%</div></div>	<div></div>
	Directors	<div><div>7%</div><div>10%</div><div>83%</div></div>	<div></div>
Overall, our organisation is performing well.	GMs	<div><div>9%</div><div>16%</div><div>75%</div></div>	<div></div>
	Chairs	<div><div>2%</div><div>16%</div><div>82%</div></div>	<div></div>

Responses legend:

- Disagree: Strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), slightly disagree (3)
- Neutral: Neither agree nor disagree (4), Slightly agree (5)
- Agree: Agree (6), Strongly agree (7)

Benchmark legend:

- Bottom quartile
- 2nd & 3rd quartiles
- Top quartile
- N/a = Not benchmarked



KEY GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES

Survey respondents were asked to identify their two biggest governance challenges.

We have analysed the respective views of directors and GMs, categorising results into five headings, collectively representing the key governance challenges presently faced by Australian golf clubs.

These challenges relate to the following main areas:

- › Governance Effectiveness - understanding the role
- › Governance Effectiveness - working as a team
- › Financial Sustainability & Capital Planning
- › Board Skills, Leadership & Succession Planning
- › Strategic, Execution & Risk

Referencing survey question results, each is detailed over the following pages.

Governance Effectiveness: understanding the role

Governance Effectiveness remains the most frequently mentioned challenge for boards and management, particularly in role clarity and operational interference.

Specific challenges identified by each cohort included:

Board	Management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Separation between governance and management roles. › Directors interfering in operational matters. › Lack of role clarity and overreach by directors. › The need for a more strategic focus rather than micromanaging. › Weak board leadership, including ineffective chairs and decision-making. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Directors being too involved in operational matters rather than governance. › Struggles in transitioning from operational to strategic oversight. › Lack of understanding of governance roles and responsibilities. › Need for clearer strategic execution rather than just high-level discussions. › Boards focusing on monthly financials rather than long-term planning.

Relevant survey results are illustrated below.

Directors demonstrate a clear understanding of their role including how it differs from the role of management.	GMs	24%	13%	63%	
	Directors	13%	12%	75%	

Responses to our survey question, “how do you score the current balance between the operations focus and strategic focus of your board?” indicated some discrepancies between how directors and GMs see the role and performance of their board.

Generally speaking, both directors and GMs believe their board has a stronger strategy focus than operations. However, 35% of GMs feel their board tends to focus too much on operations, as opposed to 30% of directors.

Governance Effectiveness: working as a team

Governance Effectiveness remains the most frequently mentioned challenge for boards and management, particularly in role clarity and operational interference.

Specific challenges identified by each cohort included:

Board	Management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Weak board leadership, including ineffective chairs and decision-making. › Board cohesion issues, including trust and conflict resolution. › Ensuring board discussions remain confidential. › Addressing personal agendas and self-interest among directors. › Improving communication and collaboration within the board. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › “Us vs. them” mentality creating division within the board. › Internal conflicts and poor boardroom relationships. › Directors not supporting the chair in decision-making. › Confidentiality breaches affecting trust and governance. › Hidden agendas and personal interests influencing decisions.

Relevant survey results are illustrated below. In all cases there is a stronger view held by directors than held by GMs.

Appropriate action would be/is taken to address any individual director issues (i.e. unsatisfactory commitment or performance, or undesirable or questionable behaviour).	GMs	<div> <div>29%</div> <div>24%</div> <div>47%</div> </div>	
	Directors	<div> <div>14%</div> <div>26%</div> <div>59%</div> </div>	
The board works constructively as a team (it has a collegial and productive working relationship that fosters trust and respect).	GMs	<div> <div>23%</div> <div>20%</div> <div>57%</div> </div>	
	Directors	<div> <div>13%</div> <div>19%</div> <div>68%</div> </div>	

One of the key observations we make in our client work is the dynamic that exists in the boardroom. Whilst having a different set of concerns, our survey found that there is general strong agreement on the quality of the GM's working relationships with both the board chair and the wider board.

The board and management have an effective working relationship (i.e. collegial, respectful and with an independence of thought).	GMs	<div> <div>10%</div> <div>22%</div> <div>69%</div> </div>	
	Directors	<div> <div>7%</div> <div>15%</div> <div>78%</div> </div>	
The chair has a constructive working relationship with the CEO/GM (supportive and collaborative, yet independent).	GMs	<div> <div>8%</div> <div>12%</div> <div>81%</div> </div>	
	Directors	<div> <div>7%</div> <div>10%</div> <div>83%</div> </div>	



Tips for chairs & boards

- › Have a robust discussion with your board about its role and how it differs from the role of management.
- › Clearly set out the board's role in a Board Charter or a Terms of Reference.
- › Ensure directors understand their legal duties and responsibilities.
- › Induct new directors appropriately in the board's role and how it differs from that of management.
- › Empower all directors to pull up those they see over-reaching into management's role.
- › Encourage directors to put themselves in the shoes of the GM when they want to give instructions to them or second-guess their decisions.
- › Shift the balance of discussions from the operational (transactional and day-to-day) to the strategic (systemic, cultural and longer term). Discussing what value the board will add and the legacy it will leave over, say, the next five years, can help.
- › Structure agendas and board papers to focus on strategy and club performance.
- › Ensure your board has an appropriate number of board committees (not too many) and the terms of reference for each.

Tips for GMs

- › Help the board take a longer-term and more strategic perspective by reorienting the papers provided to the board.
- › Be more vocal and garner support from the chair to call out instances of directors meddling in operational issues.
- › Support the chair to implement the tips included in the chair's list above.
- › With the chair, establish protocols for director interaction with staff.

Financial Sustainability & Capital Planning

Financial Sustainability & Strategic Planning were ranked as the second most critical concerns for directors and the third most critical for GMs.

Both are acutely aware of the need to balance investments, debt and long-term stability. GMs were more conscious of past underinvestment in capital expenditure and the conflict directors have regarding financial/pricing decisions.

Specific challenges identified by each cohort included:

Board	Management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Long-term financial sustainability and risk management. › Balancing capital expenditure with financial constraints. › Managing debt repayment and financing infrastructure projects. › Aligning financial priorities with member expectations. › Revenue generation strategies, including modernising business models. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Struggles with long-term financial planning and risk management. › Underinvestment in infrastructure and urgent capital expenditure concerns. › Director reluctance to make difficult financial decisions. › Ensuring financial controls are reviewed and maintained. › Conflicts over capital expenditure priorities.

Despite the above findings, more than 75% of respondents felt that their club was performing well.

"Performing well", however, does not confirm long term financial strength or capital sustainability.

We are encouraging all clubs to adopt a much longer term capital view, with clear visibility over its ability (or otherwise) to replace and reinvest in assets as and when required, the goal being to create a club that has enduring relevance to both its current and future member base.

Overall, our organisation is performing well.	GMs	9%	16%	75%	
	Chairs	2%	16%	82%	

Tips for chairs, boards & GMs

- › Develop a thorough 10 year capital plan, having identified and valued each and every asset that will ultimately require replacement.
- › Use operations modelling to measure the gap between identified capital needs and forecast operational funding.
- › Understanding the levers available, model operating scenarios that work towards a decreased gap.
- › Often remind club members of the value of the club's assets and the need to replace them.
- › Better tell the story regarding the club's future capital needs to club members.

Board Skills, Leadership & Succession Planning

Board skills, leadership and succession planning was ranked as the third key challenge identified by directors. Concerns exist around the ability to attract and train effective directors, with major concerns around director competency and internal board relationships.

Board skills and leadership was the second ranked key challenge by GMs, with a different set of concerns, more focused on turnover related challenges and continuity of decision making.

Within succession planning, the issues of diversity and inclusion are a growing theme, but are secondary to governance and financial sustainability concerns.

Specific challenges identified by each cohort included:

Board	Management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Attracting skilled and diverse directors. › Effective board renewal and leadership transition. › Ensuring directors have relevant governance and business experience. › Need for better induction and training for new directors. › Managing director tenure and term limits for stability. › Increasing board diversity (gender, age, skills mix). › Addressing gender and equality issues in governance. › Adapting to modern governance expectations and cultural shifts. › Transitioning from traditional to progressive governance models. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Lack of governance skills and experience among directors. › High board turnover making long-term projects difficult. › Lack of structured succession planning and leadership development. › Difficulty in attracting skilled directors. › Election of directors based on popularity rather than expertise. › The need to modernize governance structures to be more inclusive. › Challenges in addressing gender equity and membership diversity. › Older board demographics resistant to change. › Balancing traditional club structures with governance improvements.

Tips for chairs, boards & GMs

- › Consider whether your constitution and other governance documentation needs to be updated.
- › Consider required adjustments to member voting rights and/or board eligibility.
- › Discuss the club's risk management systems and maturity and the extent that they need to be improved. Ensure you have a risk management framework to manage and mitigate those risks. If required, develop an appropriate improvement plan.
- › Regularly survey your members, seeking continual understanding of expectations and needs.
- › Obtain an independent review of current governance processes/structures.

Board continuity

Given our planning focus, and regular engagement with our club client base, it should not be surprising to learn that we value continuity.

In a club environment, where outcomes are not owned by any one individual, where the direction to be pursued requires consensus, where members can come and go with no real loyalty, where many can have and do have a say, and where many confuse the tax classification of 'not-for-profit' as also being the business goal, real change in golf clubs is hard to achieve quickly.

It is our observation that outcomes are typically improved, bit by bit, over time. Given this reality, critical to progress being made, is stability, enabling continuity of thinking, informed decision making and strategy execution.

The structures that shape board stability, as defined in club constitutions, however, do not make this goal easy to achieve. Across the surveyed clubs for this report, it was found that in the most recent election cycle, 56% of directorships (4.7 roles on average) were up for election or re-election.

(Approximately one third of clubs in the GBAS Club Benchmarking are still operating under a constitution that calls for full annual election of all directors which can potentially result in a 100% turnover.) At the 2024 elections, approximately 40% were contested. Whilst post-election results saw an average of a 24% change in directors, such change is high - particularly when stability is so important.

Board turnover results from our 2025 survey are summarised below.

Measure	2024	2025
Board size	8.7	8.4
Roles up for election	5.1	4.7
Built in annual change %	59%	56%
Contested roles	1.5	2.0
% contested	30%	39%
New board members after AGM	1.9	2.0
% change re-elected roles	39%	43%
Overall board % change	21%	24%

Given the need to obtain a full understanding of an issue before an informed decision can be made, this inbuilt change mechanism is the first real challenge clubs face when trying to make permanent improvements to their own governance processes or executing a strategy that is time critical.

The reality is that with such regular change, outcomes achieved can be very much dependent upon the dynamic that exists within the elected cohort, and its ability to work effectively or otherwise with the GM.

Whilst the 2025 survey found that 63% of GMs and 75% of directors felt that there were no measurable disruptions to the smooth operations of the board following the previous AGM (a similar outcome as found in 2024), GMs were, however, more likely to have felt that there was some disruption than did directors.

Of the GMs who reported worse governance outcomes, 50% had a change in board chair during the year.

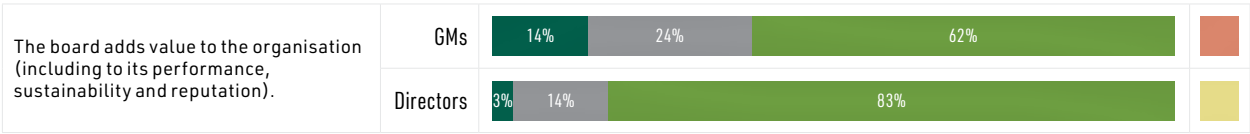
Strategy, Execution & Risk

At the heart of what we do, strategic planning can create and/or improve governance or be the outcome of better governance. The goal of planning is to be future focused, mapping the outcomes required to both deliver and fund a satisfactory member experience that has enduring relevance.

Strategy related, compliance risk and membership management were also mentioned, though of less frequent concern for directors and GMs compared to governance and financial issues.

Specific challenges identified by each cohort included:

Board	Management
<div><ul style="list-style-type: none">› A lack of alignment between strategic planning and execution.› The need for a well-defined vision and long-term direction.› How to ensure continuity in decision-making despite leadership changes.› Prioritizing key initiatives to avoid distractions.› Keeping up with governance best practices and legislative changes.› Ensuring compliance with financial, legal, and operational regulations.› Managing risk effectively, including workplace safety (OH&S).› Cybersecurity, governance reporting and policy development.› Managing member expectations and engagement.› Addressing generational and cultural shifts in membership.› Balancing inclusivity and modernising membership models.› Addressing resistance to change from long-standing members.</div>	<div><ul style="list-style-type: none">› Difficulty in ensuring strategic plans are actioned effectively.› Over-emphasis on high-level reporting without actionable steps.› There is a mismatch between board vision and operational capacity.› There is resistance to change and outdated governance practices.› Keeping up with governance best practices and policy updates.› Meeting legal and regulatory requirements.› Cyber resilience and ESG (environmental, social and governance) reporting.› Ensuring constitutional and by-law compliance.› Directors lacking knowledge of governance policies.</div>



Tips for chairs & boards

- › Have a high-level discussion with your board and management about the expected outcomes and main elements of the current strategic plan.
- › Oversee the preparation and/or update of your strategic plan with a focus on the matters that will add the most value over the longer term.
- › Embed reporting against progress of the strategic plan as a stand-alone item and in board papers at meetings.
- › Ensure the development of the strategic plan appropriately engages all directors, the GM and senior staff, and stakeholders if and where appropriate. This will ensure that they all buy-in to its execution.
- › Agree on the metrics that will help monitor the club's performance and the successful execution of the strategic plan.

Tips for GMs

- › Encourage the chair and board to engage you and your team in the preparation of the club's strategy. Go out of your way, with your team, to do all the work and provide the assistance requested.
- › Once the strategic plan is signed off, ensure it is well communicated to your staff and the membership. Work hard to bring the plan to life on a regular basis, including at board and committee meetings.
- › Work out the key metrics that you and your team will use to measure your club's performance. Create a scorecard of higher-level metrics you will report against to the board on a regular basis.



About Golf Business Advisory Services (GBAS)

Based in Melbourne Victoria, GBAS is acknowledged as Australia's leading provider of independent golf business advisory services. The company has extensive experience across the full spectrum of golf facility operations and leverages its unrivalled insights to deliver tailored client outcomes.

Through its many strategic planning engagements, GBAS is a regular visitor to boardrooms around the country and is well positioned to observe the governance processes in place in Australian golf clubs.

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Board Surveys made easy.

About Board Surveys

Board Surveys' vision is to help tens of thousands of boards around the globe improve their performance and effectiveness. It does this by distributing affordable, world class, fit-for-purpose, benchmarked board surveys supported by optional expert advice.

Board Surveys has a database of more than 500 different boards, which includes boards of golf and other sporting clubs. It has governance experts and project managers at its head office in Melbourne, Australia. It also has board consulting and industry specialist partners like GBAS throughout Australasia and the world.

Board Surveys is a sister brand of Board Benchmarking, both of which are owned by survey and benchmarking technology experts, Insync.

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