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Changing a Board of Trustees From Futile to Fertile

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Two major challenges facing our community colleges these days are the difficulty boards of trustees have leading the institution and the ineffective and sometimes poor relationships between a college's president and its board of trustees. What makes these problems difficult is the inability of colleges to select the members of their board of trustees and the unwillingness of many trustees to educate themselves in governing and leading. Therefore, college presidents and effective trustees must learn how to work around these limitations to create a high-performing board of trustees.

Often, we hear complaints about a board because the members micromanage or they are disengaged, or worse, they fail to attend board meetings at all. Moreover, when they do attend meetings, some members don't engage in the discussions, while others practice a one-way communication style. Even worse is when board members lack an understanding of their job and fail to appreciate the struggles of college presidency.

Although these difficulties seem unmanageable and daunting, the president, with the help of involved and educated board members, can improve the performance of the board of trustees by changing the dynamics of meetings and discussions. The college president can help ensure that board members see their role as meaningful and that they give an appropriate amount of time and attention to the business of the college.

To help a board grow from futile to fertile, the president can help the board learn its role in the life of the college and in the leadership of the institution. The president can involve the board in a series of steps that can focus board attention on the future of the college and on service to the community. This paper will describe various steps a president can take with the board to reshape the board's work and create more meaningful relationships. Frequently, board members view the president as the leader of the college and the board as the management oversight committee. By clearly articulating the areas of shared leadership and responsibility between the chief executive and the board, a president can help the board expand its involvement in generating ideas and building a vision for the future of the college. Constructing a productive, successful environment allows for a positive board response and, ultimately, a cooperative and mutually supportive relationship between the president and the board.

Change the agenda format. As mundane and simple as it may seem, changing the format of the board agenda is a first step in granting the board more time to discuss issues and generate ideas for the president to explore. Agendas dictate what a board discusses, at what length, and to what end. Thus, to control the agenda is to control the board's work. A president should work closely with the

board chair in setting the agenda. Together, they can help trustees find ways to stay connected with the college's issues outside of regular meetings. These connections will then help the president and board chair include appropriate agenda items and facilitate a thorough understanding of the issues by the entire board. In building the agenda, the president and board chair need to work together to ensure sufficient time for board members to argue passionately about matters of critical importance. Although *Robert's Rules of Order* prevail as a requirement for lock step, these rules may need to be modified to allow for open and frank discussions by the board.

Educate board members about and engage them in the agenda. Engaged cultures are characterized by candor and a willingness to challenge, and they reflect the social and work dynamics of a high-performing team. By facilitating such an environment, a president can help the board evolve into such a team. Though board meetings can be used to educate members about an issue, this education should occur outside the board meeting. This allows more of the board's meeting time to be spent on discussion and action. For example, board reports can be recorded and delivered via podcast or webcast between meetings. The board and the president might also communicate questions and comments about such issues through email, which could save meetings for the real work of the board.

Develop issue-centered agendas. In addition, the transformed board agendas could also be focused on a specific issue at various times during the year. As an example, at the start of each year, the president could work with the board as it develops three or four top priorities, such as direction, student success, staff development, and succession planning. The board chair and president could then place each topic at the top of the agenda for at least one meeting during the year. This would turn staff and board attention to this top priority, would allow for a full discussion of the issue, and could lead to the adoption of new policy that would shape the college's future.

Focus on the vision. Although changing the agenda and expected board activities during a meeting can help, these actions alone will not fully change the board. Like most quests for change, board building begins with a vision. The president and board chair can help focus the board on the future by steering commentary and discussions properly. The president can work with the board to establish and maintain an overarching level of engagement based on annual expectations and ground rules for board meetings and for trustees' roles relative to the president's role. The ground rules should describe the rules of decorum and the heart of the board's efforts, ensuring that the board concentrates on the "what" rather than the "how." One of the most effective ways to forge a high-performing board is to call on the trustees to connect with something larger than themselves. The college's vision can serve as this larger goal for the board to attain. By involving the board in collaborative development of the college's vision and mission statements, a president can also help differing trustees build bridges and create effective working relationships.

Establish trust. Trust and respect among board members is critical to the successful building of an engaged board culture, and trust and respect between the board and the chief executive officer is equally crucial. By agreeing to focus on the future of the college, the college president and board chair can help forge the necessary trust and respect among members. This open and respectful environment is maintained by retaining the healthy social dynamics of interaction,

as well as the competence, integrity, and constructive involvement of all trustees. Periodically rotating trustees through various small groups and committees as well as board leadership will also broaden interaction. The impact will be the prevention or elimination of polarizing factors. The president, board chair, and trustees all need to do everything in their power to prevent division among board members.

Communicate appropriately and adequately. The president can also inspire trust and respect from the board by keeping trustees informed, in a timely manner, about college issues. Varying desires for involvement by each trustee may make this difficult. Basically, there are two equally effective ways of keeping a board in the dark and creating an environment of distrust: (1) provide the board with too little information and then surprise members with new details after they've made a decision; and (2) give trustees too much information, which leads to a lack of understanding. Therefore, it is critical that the president not only assist the board in communicating its information needs, but also appropriately adjust the information load going from the chief executive's office to the trustees. Typically boards subsist on just two sources of information: (1) retrospective data on the college's performance and operations, and (2) presentations by management, particularly by the president, whose articulation of the future and interpretation of financials significantly shape the board's views. It is the president's responsibility to ensure that board members receive the right information at the right time and in the right format to perform their duties. The best boards, in collaboration with their president, design processes to deliver formal information that combines both leading and lagging performance indicators associated with their goals.

Facilitate board accountability for outcomes. In education, leading indicators may be factors that predict future successes or failures of college programs. For example, if students who complete their core English and math courses in the first two semesters of college graduate at a significantly higher rate than students taking such classes later in their college career, then the performance data for successful students completing math and English in their first year can be used as a leading indicator of graduation success. This new accountability makes trustees responsible for outcomes. They can best fulfill this responsibility for results, not by dictating the details of assessing performance, but by questioning performance results, and especially their use. Trustees need to ask college administrators critical questions and insist on clear answers. By providing sufficient information about college issues, the college president builds trust between the chief executive and board.

Expand the board's role beyond its traditional work. The nature of the board's work also determines board effectiveness. Unless they are offered the opportunity to lead, boards will typically act in a fiduciary manner. Structuring all the board's work in a fiduciary manner will create the disengaged environment college presidents need to avoid. Presidents will find that a board locked into operating this way will have a difficult time leading. Instead, trustees will become comfortable in a leadership role as they have more opportunities and successes in that role. In some cases, presidents, board chairs, and trustees have added the board's involvement in the college's planning process to the traditional fiduciary work. Though these efforts are beneficial, they still limit the board's involvement to working a few times a year on developing goals, creating time schedules, and measuring performance. Planning does afford the board the opportunity to focus on the future, but alone it is not enough. Realistically, boards need to perform

certain fiduciary functions and provide leadership planning for the college. However, the president and board chair can help minimize these functions through the use of consent agendas and board communication outside of the meeting, and the inclusion of leadership work. Such work may not be possible on all board agendas, but the goal should be less fiduciary work and more leadership. As an example, look back at your board's last 12 agendas and count how many opportunities the board had to act in a fiduciary manner, in a strategic planning manner, and then in a leadership manner.

Provide opportunities for thoughtful reflection and discussion. To truly lead a college, the board needs to have opportunities to question and formulate options before making final decisions. The president can plan periodic board retreats or organize open discussions to create opportunities for board leadership. By offering trustees the opportunity to act as leaders, the president helps board members move beyond micromanagement to the big-picture business of the college. If, for example, trustees are exploring the college's sustainability efforts, the president may find that the board's views differ from those of the faculty or administration; indeed, the board's views can lead the college to explore new concepts. In this example, the board could identify the college's largest use of paper products as the sale and limited use of textbooks, causing the college to investigate eliminating the use of textbooks to reduce the waste stream generated by its normal business. Such a discussion may never arise if the trustees are not afforded the opportunity to generate new ideas for the development of college programs.

Benefits of a high-performing board. Uncovering the hidden value of an organization's people will increase its chance of success, which is particularly true in a world where intellectual capital and knowledge are increasing in our colleges. A high-performing board will draw a high-performing president who can then appoint and support a high-performing staff. Together, the president and the board can stimulate the intellectual capital of college staff and faculty to create new ways of doing the college's business. Knowing what needs to be done is not sufficient, and neither is talking about what needs to be done. A high-performing board of trustees moves the organization ahead to increased and improved achievement by working closely with the president to build a strategic plan and to enable staff to implement it effectively. To document its effectiveness and help ensure accountability, a high-performing board also ensures that its own performance is measured. The president facilitates this kind of board leadership by engaging the board in the overarching business of the college.

When given the opportunity to lead and have a meaningful role in the future of the college, the trustees can come together to form a high-performing board. However, the success of a board is not only the responsibility of each board member; it is also the responsibility of the college president.

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