

Leadership 101: Maximizing Board Effectiveness

By Dr. Scott D. Miller and Dr. Marylouise Fennell - *College Planning & Management, November 2010*

We too often forget that the administration of an institution consists of the appointed president and the volunteer Board of Trustees. Working in tandem, they can effectively advance a college or university, if expectations are clear and each understands and observes its proper role.

Frequent miscommunications occur around how “hands-on” the Board should be in day-to-day institutional management, how to effectively evaluate volunteer leadership, and especially, how to avoid real and perceived conflict of interest.

Roles and Expectations

Volunteer boards can and should frame “the big picture,” setting the stage for long-term success. Trustees’ appropriate role is to hire, evaluate, and support the CEO, holding him or her accountable. They should not micro-manage day-to-day decisions such as hiring and evaluation of staff; these are properly the role of the president. This represents a special challenge for trustees also serving on corporate boards, where the business model is often somewhat more hands-on. As one of our most effective trustees recently remarked, “We (board members) knew what long-term strategies the college needed to pursue, but we had no idea of what tactical decisions we needed to get there.” He understood and clearly articulated that, in the words of a colleague, “My role is to steer the ship, not to set the course.”

Ongoing Evaluation

In our experience, boards are quick to evaluate CEOs; they are not always so quick to evaluate themselves. Yet both are necessary for effective governance. We recommend a structured, systematic method for evaluating trustees by means of an executive nominating committee comprised of the current Board chair and vice chair and immediate past chair. This group should evaluate attendance and participation of every board member as his or her term nears expiration. Likewise, we suggest an ongoing means of evaluating the effectiveness of Board committees by requiring each to set specific goals and timelines for achievement at the beginning of each academic year.

Orientation and Annual Review

After they join the Board, but before their first meeting, it is critical that new trustees attend an orientation session clearly delineating their roles, responsibilities, and expectations. Ethical and legal conduct and self-disclosure, such as the new Federal Accounting Standards Board (FASB) requirements, need to be thoroughly reviewed and clarified. These affect the participation of Board members from specific industries or institutions who may need to recuse themselves from certain decisions.

Thereafter, we recommend holding an annual retreat for all members to update them on new requirements and to refresh their collective memories. There should be “no surprises” after joining the Board.

Moreover, trustees should be encouraged to keep abreast of best practice and trends in governance and philanthropy by reading current publications such as the Association of Governing Boards’ (AGB’s) Trusteeship to maximize their effectiveness. Retreats can include discussion and application of such articles.

“Give, get, or get off,” has long been a standard for expected Board performance, but these guidelines go well beyond that old adage, ensuring the Board members and CEOs are partners in institutional leadership.

When both clearly understand and implement their rules, roles, and expectations, presidents and boards can maximize their effectiveness, minimize conflict, and exert true leadership.

Dr. Scott D. Miller is president of the College and M. M. Cochran Professor of Leadership Studies at Bethany College in West Virginia. Now in his third college presidency, he has served as a CEO for nearly 20 years.

Dr. Marylouise Fennell, RSM, a former president of Carlow University in Pittsburgh, PA, is senior counsel for the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) and principal of Marylouise Fennell, Higher Education Services. They have collaborated on five books, including Presidential Perspectives (2009) and President to President: Views on Technology in Higher Education (2010). Both serve as consultants to college presidents and boards.