

Timely and Thoughtful Does It

The Board's Role in Evaluating the President

The literature on non-profit governance is unanimous in listing regular appraisal of the CEO's performance among the top two or three responsibilities assigned to boards. Yet many board leaders are puzzled over how to provide the president with feedback in a way that is comfortable and useful for everyone involved. In fact, In Trust receives more inquiries about presidential evaluation than any other single topic.

Fortunately, and contrary to what many board members fear, presidential evaluation need not be an overwhelming, stressful or unpleasant undertaking – for the board or the head of the school. By paying attention to a few basic principles, board members can move forward with confidence, knowing they are providing their president with the kind of feedback he or she wants and needs.

Begin Early and Keep It Up

Whether evaluation of the president is mandated in the by-laws of the school, outlined in the employment agreement with the president or is the outgrowth of an informal agreement between board leadership and the head of the school, the board's commitment to providing a regular and thoughtful performance review is key to the long-term success of a presidency. Strong boards demonstrate their care for the president (and the institution) by providing regularly scheduled evaluation of the chief executive's work, beginning the process early and continuing it throughout the whole of a presidency.

Such has been the experience of Eugene Roop, president of Bethany Theological Seminary in Richmond, Indiana. Although it has been thirteen years since he accepted the call to Bethany, Roop retains a vivid memory of the conversation he had with board members about presidential evaluation during his initial interview with them. "Actually, the discussion was more among themselves, guided by the chair," he recalls with pride. The board's ongoing commitment to an annual review of

the president's goals and accomplishments continues to energize and encourage Roop in his service to the institution.

Father Charles Bouchard, president of Aquinas Institute of Theology in St. Louis, Missouri since 1989, has had a similar story to tell. Talk about presidential evaluation came up at the beginning of his term of service, with the first formal review coming after his second year in office. In preparation for that initial evaluation, the Aquinas board created an assessment

Aware as they are of the long hours, high stress and limited financial rewards that come with a seminary presidency, it is no surprise when board members are reluctant to engage in a review of the president's work. It can feel almost ungrateful to bring up the idea of evaluation, and all the more so when the institution is doing well. However, as three long-time seminary heads remind us, trustees need not (should not) apologize for making presidential evaluation a priority.



PHOTO COURTESY BETHANY THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

President Eugene F. Roop
Bethany Theological Seminary
Richmond, Indiana

"By couching evaluation in terms of goals and then paying attention to whether those goals are reasonable, the board can be genuinely helpful to the president in setting priorities and organizing his or her time. I've been grateful when board members have made suggestions about what I could let go, and even more so when they tried to put in place supports to lighten the president's load. It made me feel much less alone in my job."

TOOL BOX

New from In Trust

A template questionnaire for conducting a goal-based evaluation of the president's performance is available under Board Development Resources at www.intrust.org/resources.

EVALUATION PITFALLS

- >> Failing to bring definition & consistency to the process
- >> Judging a whole year's work on a single incident, good or bad
- >> Failing to prioritize expectations of the president and for the institution
- >> Rating personality traits above performance
- >> Refusing to say anything critical
- >> Failing to say anything good
- >> Leaving evaluation up to the board chair alone

form using statements pulled from an Association of Governing Boards instrument along with ideas found in *The Good Steward*, a now-out-of-print book on theological school trusteeship.

For the first few years, the board invited comment from faculty, staff and students to augment their own assessment of the president's performance. Over time, as Bouchard and his board have gotten to know each other better, the evaluation process has become less formal and slightly less inclusive, but just as valuable for the president, the board and the institution. "All presidents have blind spots and sometimes the blind spots can become pretty serious. A regular evaluation keeps the president's vision broad," Bouchard states.

It took the board at the Protestant Episcopal Theological Seminary in Virginia, where Martha Horne has served as dean since 1994, a bit longer to establish a regular evaluation. As Horne recalls, "there wasn't a culture of evaluation anywhere within the institution" when she stepped into the deanship.

At the end of her first year, Horne received two dozen red roses and a note from the board telling her she was doing a terrific job. "It was wonderful getting the roses and the kind words were an encouragement," she remembers, "but by the third year, I was looking for more specific feedback. I talked with the board chair about the idea of an annual evaluation and shortly after, we introduced the fairly informal process that we continue to use today."

Keep It Simple and Institution Specific

Although a seeming godsend for a busy board, off-the-shelf assessment instruments are not necessarily the best choice in a seminary setting. As convenient as these tools may be, pre-packaged instruments don't capture the nuances of a specific presidency or institutional situation. The better way, as Bouchard, Horne and Roop suggest, is to base the evaluation on institutional priorities and the president's own plans. Every five years or so, the board may want to contract with

an outside facilitator for a more comprehensive review of the president's performance, but on an annual basis, simple is best.

At all three institutions, the annual evaluation begins with a written report in which the president (or dean, in Horne's case) reflects on his or her progress in meeting goals from the previous year and then sets out goals to be achieved in the coming year, an exercise Horne credits with helping her know "I am spending time doing the right thing." At Bethany, the question becomes, "Are the

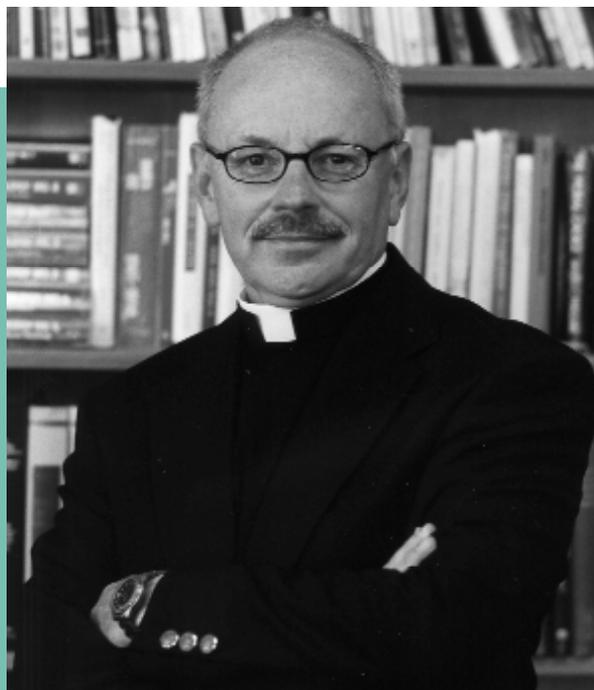


PHOTO COURTESY AQUINAS INSTITUTE OF THEOLOGY

President Charles E. Bouchard
Aquinas Institute of Theology
St. Louis, Missouri

"The board needs to be sensitive to the culture of the campus when deciding who beyond its own membership should be involved in the evaluation of the president. It can be a helpful thing to invite others into the conversation, but first make certain there is adequate trust and a shared understanding that, if done well, assessment of the president's work is just as much an assessment of the entire learning community."



PHOTO BY ALEXANDRA DORR

Dean Martha J. Horne

*Protestant Episcopal Theological Seminary in Virginia
Alexandria, Virginia*

“One advantage of a regular evaluation of the chief executive’s performance is that it encourages the board to flag problems before they get out of control. When there is unhappiness with the president, it is unfair – to the individual and to the institution – to let things just simmer. The better way is for board leadership to work with the person, helping him or her find the resources that will lead to a long and successful tenure.”

president’s goals and work plan appropriate for this time in the life of the seminary?” Roop notes. Bouchard speaks of the evaluation process as “sharpening mission focus and awareness.”

As board members and others within the institution respond to the president’s report, the process also serves to “highlight differing expectations among the board, president and faculty,” Horne adds. By asking a few “right” questions about the president’s report and plans, the board can “take the temperature of the institution; can dip into the institutional

water at a particular time in the life of the school,” Bouchard says. Most important, by centering the evaluation on goals that are specific to a particular presidency, institution and churchly context, the board is able, in Roop’s words, to “move the evaluation process away from complaining and toward constructive input.”

Focus on Learning

When done well, the presidential evaluation is all about learning – by the head of the school, members of the board and anyone else who participates in the

process. “There should be no hint of suspicion that this is a secret operation for the purpose of finding out if the president isn’t doing the job,” Roop explains. “The goal is no surprises – for the board or the president. Both sides need to be candid and open with each other.”

Bouchard describes presidential evaluation as “an assessment of the entire learning community. The board has the opportunity, in the way it conducts its appraisal of the president’s performance, to engender trust, openness and greater collegiality within the seminary community.” He also mentions that, as the board takes responsibility for the evaluation process, “the membership gains a better understanding of the president’s job, what he or she does every day.”

And board members are not alone in benefiting from a reminder of what the chief executive does with his or her time. As Horne notes, she also benefits from a look back at the activities of the year just past. “Knowing I have to prepare an annual report for the board forces me to take a little time out each spring, to stop and think about the year and the way I’ve used my time. It is good to reflect on whether the things I’ve done were consistent with the plan or were forced on the school by outside forces. The process has helped me be more strategic about the use of my time – to stay focused on what’s most important,” Horne says.

Everyone Wins

Seasoned leaders like Bouchard, Horne and Roop are quick to assure board

members that nothing says “we care” like a board’s commitment to presidential evaluation. The annual review, if taken seriously by the various parties, strengthens the board/president partnership, provides a model of mutual accountability for the rest of the community to follow and enhances the legitimacy of the presidential office. **•IT•**

This is the second of a four-part series on the presidential life cycle. The first article looked at the important first year of a presidency and appeared in the Spring issue, which you can access at www.intrust.org/magazine. In the Autumn issue we’ll explore presidential search.

Continue the Discussion

In Trust welcomes your thoughts on the board’s role in presidential evaluation. Contact us at: editors@intrust.org. Comments and questions will be posted at [In Trust Online](http://InTrustOnline.com) (www.intrust.org).