

Board leadership that works

By Barbara G. Wheeler

THE CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION at **Auburn Theological Seminary** recently completed a study of leadership in accredited theological schools in the United States and Canada. The research included surveys and site visits — annual interviews over a three-year period in 10 schools with new presidents, plus six one-time visits to schools known to be very well run by experienced leaders. Some of the results were previewed in the Summer 2010 issue of *In Trust*. The full report is available from Auburn Seminary at www.auburnseminary.org/seminary-leadership.

One of the major findings of the study was that few presidents succeed, and none leave a significant legacy, without support from a competent board (or, if the school does not have its own board, other overseers such as university officials or religious authorities). In the course of the research, the team of investigators found some instances of exemplary boards. Regrettably, however, there were many more examples of boards that were passive, disengaged, or even derelict.

In the summary that follows, the study's findings are distilled into a familiar format: four "habits" of effective boards. Under these rubrics, which follow the cycle of presidential leadership from start to finish, we report on some of the best board performance we saw, and we also warn against

some of the bad practice that we found in too many cases. The team of investigators included two In Trust Governance Mentors — David Tiede and Douglass Lewis (who is also the chair of the board at In Trust) — as well as Sharon Miller, Anthony Ruger, and me, all from the Auburn Center.

Habit 1

The best boards give direction to the search for a new president.

The search for a new senior leader is a pivotal moment in the life of an institution. It is a board's major opportunity to confirm or change direction. Boards can accomplish this, we found, if they take the time — before setting a search committee to

work — to assess the strategic direction of the institution and to decide whether they want to continue on the present course or redirect the school's efforts.

We saw good examples of this. Some boards commissioned staff or outside consultants to give them more complete strategic information — on programs, enrollment, finances, giving to the school — than they ordinarily receive. They took time, often in a retreat setting, to talk about whether these data indicated that the school's mission was being accomplished. Then they drafted and adopted a statement of strategic direction.

In these good-example schools, this statement of strategic direction became the primary guidance for the search committee. They drafted a profile for a president who could lead the school in the direction indicated by the statement. They used it in interviews and as a means of assessing whether a particular candidate was a good fit. They made clear that the statement would be the basis of first-year evaluation and first-term goals for the newly hired leader.

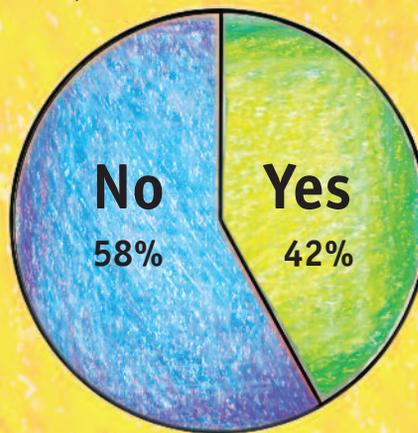
Does the adoption of a statement of direction preempt the new president's leadership role? A new president will usually be expected to develop a detailed strategic plan, but setting a general strategic direction is the job of those who have ultimate responsibility for the school and its mission. Therefore, before a search committee begins its work, it is best if those who commission the committee — a board, church authorities, or university administrators — provide direction based on a realistic analysis of the institution's condition and prospects. The best choices of presidents are made when those making the selection know what the president is expected to accomplish.

For every board or oversight group that exhibited the good strategic habit just described, we found several more that responded to an impending presidential vacancy by immediately appointing a search committee whose only mandate was to find a great candidate for the job, with no further specification than those already contained in the school's bylaws.

As Figure 1 shows, almost two-thirds of the presidents we surveyed said that no direction for the school had been set before they arrived. This is a recipe for misfit. Even the ablest presidents cannot do everything. Some are good at rescues and turnarounds; others at building on an already-strong base. Some can heal a fraught situation; others specialize in goading a somnolent institution into action. Unless the search

committee knows what the school needs to accomplish with the president's leadership, the chances that it will find the right kind of person are diminished.

Figure 1. Had the governing board set a clear direction for the school before the president was elected?



Source: Auburn Center survey of select presidents

Habit 2

The best boards give new presidents extra help as they begin their work.

The first years of an administration are critical, because they are a template for what is to come. As time goes by, patterns established early on become increasingly difficult to change.

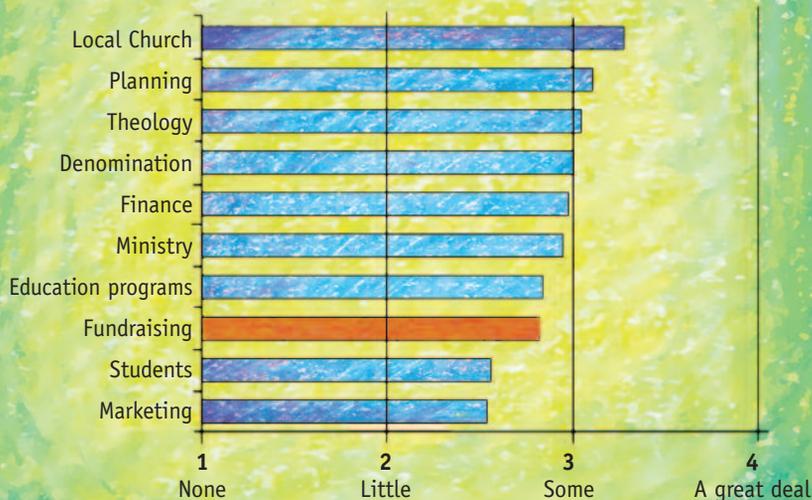
Knowing this, the board of one school we studied gave its new president structured help during the transitional period. That transition plan was impressive. An ongoing committee that included the board chair and other members helped the new president manage a variety of new challenges.

One of the first tasks was the removal of a toxic faculty member — an issue that had remained from the previous administration. The new president recalls the ouster of the faculty member as "one of those things that everybody knew had to be done but were frightened to death of the ramifications. And rightly so."

A resolution was reached. There were reverberations, but the new president felt upheld. "I didn't feel that I was all by myself. I was taking a lot of hits, but that's what you sign up for. But I felt we were pretty united."

As they start their jobs, most new presidents do not have occasion to use the first person plural, saying, "We are in this together." For that matter,

Figure 2. How much expertise do board members report bringing to the board?



Source: Auburn Center survey of theological school board members, 2000

neither do many experienced ones. The board chairs (or university officers) who assiduously courted them did not give the presidents much attention during their first year. Half of all presidents said that they did not know what they were expected to accomplish during the first year, and most new presidents did not even have a substantive review at the end of that period.

There is a great deal for a new president to learn, and the absence of guidance and oversight leaves even a very able person in a lonely position. "There was no one to in-service me" as he learned the job, said one.

The power of the presidency is one reality most presidents encounter on their own, as did this president who moved into the job from the school's faculty:

I had to learn that my words had a completely different level of impact. As soon as I stepped into the office of president . . . , I had to be much more careful about what I said as president than in any other role because people invest much more in what a president says.

Three schools in this study had dire institutional problems when the new president arrived. In two cases, the board was only dimly aware of how serious the situation was, either because the previous president had concealed information from them or because they had neglected to do due diligence. "They threw me the keys to the Titanic," said the president of one school. The presidents of failing schools were not alone. One-quarter of those surveyed said that before they took the job they were underinformed about finances, enrollment, fundraising, and other challenges.

In short: Too many boards back off as soon as a president is appointed. The best boards set goals for the first year of the presidency and then appoint a transition team to help the president achieve them.

Habit 3

The best boards develop an active partnership with the president that offers guidance, support, and critical correction (if necessary).

As a presidency matures, so should the relationship between the president and board (or superiors). It should be the president's closest partnership. In the healthiest relationships and strongest institutions, there is two-way disclosure of problems and difficulties, candid criticism in both directions, warm collegiality and personal support, and firm backing as the president performs the most difficult tasks — asking for large donations, handling public relations and personnel problems, imposing financial discipline, and asking faculty and staff to change their patterns of work in the interest of the school's future. As a basis for wise decision making on all these dimensions, the president must provide the board with full information about the challenges and opportunities the school confronts. The board or other supervisors must give the president time, attention, and tangible support.

In the best case we studied, the transition team ceased to operate after the president's first year, but the level of board attention and involvement did not diminish. Board members were regular in their attendance, well informed about major policy issues facing the school, diligent in securing support for the school, and both supportive and constructively critical in their relationship to the presidents. Good boards conducted annual evaluations of both the president and the board itself, recognizing that presidential performance is closely linked to board commitment and competence.

Few boards we observed, however, met this standard. One new president (who came from the school's own faculty and who knew individual board members) was shocked to discover the lack of governing capacity in the board as a body. This president also felt that the board's level of commitment of time and resources was distressingly low.

Why are boards not more deeply engaged? Some say that they hang back out of concern that the board might overstep its bounds and insert itself into management issues. We saw instances of this happening. In one school we observed, the dean

said that the board “thinks it has a ‘policing mandate,’” and another administrator complained that board meetings were occasions to “beat up on staff.” More often, however, boards neglected their duties. They seemed especially hesitant to hold a president to fundraising benchmarks, particularly when they also feel unprepared for this task. (Figures 2 and 3 show that both new presidents and boards lack confidence in their fundraising abilities.) Many boards appear to restrict their roles to cheerleading and rubber-stamping.

One highly competent president reported receiving too little critical perspective on the part of the board:

My relationship to the board . . . is charmed. . . . It is really good. Probably much better than I deserve. The board likes me. The board affirms me. The board gives me license. They eat up everything I say to a point where it would probably be good if they were more critical. But see, the difference is the board — the board and people in the building see different things. See, the board only sees the big pieces, and they only see what I’m doing externally. . . . They don’t see my shortcomings inside the building. So the relationship is excellent, but it’s better than I deserve.

One of the most alarming patterns we noticed occurred in schools in which some board members had voiced their concerns about presidential performance. Often they were sidelined, and board colleagues were reluctant to call the president to account. The bent of seminary boards is to do what the president wants. Critical board members typically leave after their first failed attempt to raise legitimate questions.

Some of the very best presidents we observed had inherited board or administrative superiors who were weak, lazy, or irresponsible. The presidents’ first impulse was to work around the board or administration, but they soon realized that their superiors are also their primary constituency — “They are ‘my people,’” said one brilliant president — and the job is too big to do without the board’s active partnership and support. These presidents concluded that an empowered board or a well-informed university administration is essential for the well-being of the institution.

So the best presidents gave priority to managing upwards. They took an active part in recruiting strong board members and orienting them to the work of the school. They deftly educated university officials about issues in theological education and the special role their

school plays on the wider stage. They recognized that an active and well-informed board or university administration that gives substantive oversight is not a threat to their autonomy but is instead their most valuable asset.

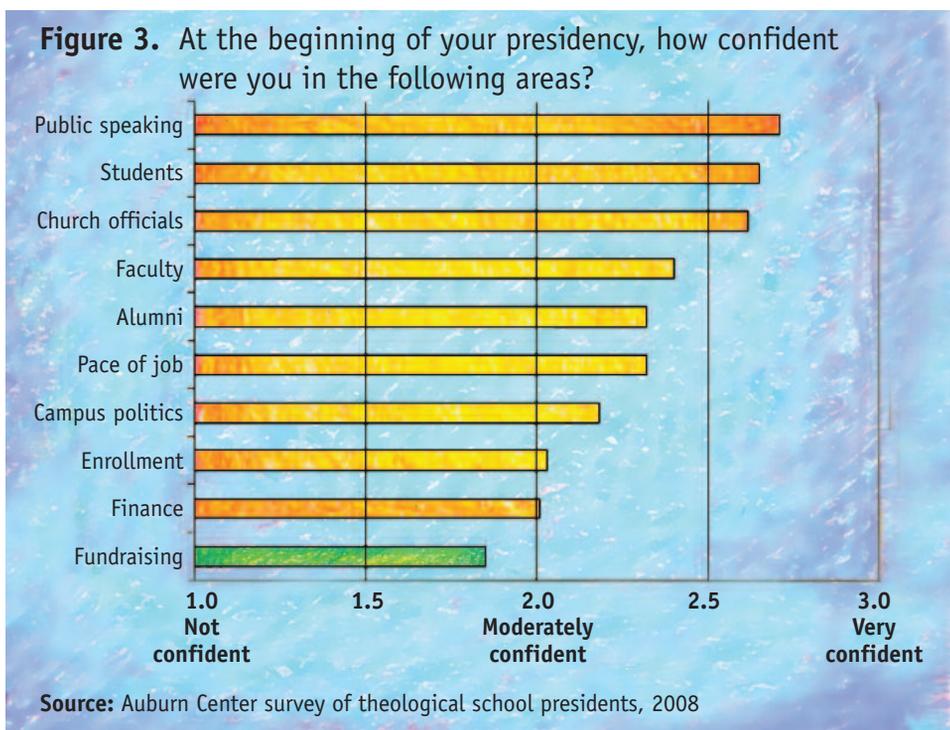
In the cases we studied, it was most often the president who took the initiative in upgrading the board. Boards can, however, take these steps for themselves. They can educate themselves in the issues that confront the school, encourage the resignations of nonattending or nonproductive board members, recruit strong replacements, discipline themselves to exercise financial oversight, give more and offer more help in fundraising, and strengthen the partnership with the president. If they take these steps, they will find that involvement and commitment are far more rewarding than the lackadaisical relationship that too many theological school board members have with their institution.

Habit 4

The best boards strengthen themselves as a presidency nears its end.

As a presidency matures and nears its end, it becomes critically important that the board be as strong and effective as possible. A board (or university or religious administration) that understands the nature, purpose, potential, and needs of the school is far more likely to pick a worthy successor. Such a board or administration has the capacity to offer that person the wise guidance and helpful oversight that the predecessor, at least initially, had to do without.

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2. Test perceptions

Although members of the executive committee may think they know the mind of the board, it is better to ask than to assume. Exemplary governance depends upon free-flowing communication — within the board and between the board and other governance stakeholders.

There needs to be a shared understanding of how board members feel about the responsibilities the executive committee has taken on. Are some trustees concerned that the executive committee has usurped work that properly belongs to the full board? Do other governance stakeholders perceive that good faith and a collegial spirit fuel communication within the board?

Slowing down long enough for self-assessment doesn't come easily, but as the executive committee seeks and accepts feedback, it models the best of shared governance.

3. Seek alternatives

Size of membership, geography, and infrequency of board meetings are sometimes cited as insurmountable barriers to efficiency in governance. That's the reason that some board members tout their reliance on a small group of highly engaged individuals as the only viable way to go. Still others grudgingly accept a strong executive committee as an unfortunate fact of board life.

But is an executive committee that functions as a board within the board the best solution to this governance conundrum? There may be other ways to address the challenges of a large or far-flung board, or one that can only meet once or twice a year.

So back to my beginning premise: If an institution is struggling with governance issues, the board should look first at the executive committee. An ounce of prevention applied at this level will almost certainly be worth a pound of cure to the school's governance system as a whole. ■

Reality check: Boards should understand grad programs

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most promising candidates find it hard to gain employment. None are predicting any improvement for the foreseeable future. Yet even in changing times, the practices and policies of academic doctoral education are basically the same as they were almost a century ago.

Boards of schools with doctoral programs should inquire about the placement rates and locations of recent graduates. What services are offered for the placement process? Does the program reflect the realities of the job market? Do new hires know what it will mean to participate in a particular setting — whether a small seminary or a university-affiliated divinity school?

Most importantly, boards should have frank discussions with senior administrators about the big picture: Does the school's mission and its practices take into account the current economy? Do programs

deliver on their promise? What room is there for change?

Paradoxically, the current crisis in the economy and in the job market is fertile soil for change. With so many graduates unable to find conventional teaching positions, programs ought to pay attention to the gap between doctoral education and the conditions students encounter upon graduation.

In the best scenario, conversations will take place at every level around program purposes, practices, and outcomes. Boards can help a school fulfill its mission by asking these questions and encouraging these conversations. These issues are crucial for any institution's strategic and budgetary planning. ■

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Board leadership that works

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When the possibility of transition first appears, the board or the president's supervisors should take stock. They should ask strategic questions:

Is the board or supervisory structure as strong as possible? If not, it is a good time to add strength or restructure for the critical process of transition.

Is the board aware of the condition of the school and its needs for the next period? If not, an assessment, perhaps with independent consultants participating, is in order.

Is the relationship with the outgoing president positive? Whether or not the presidency ended at the president's initiative, it is in the school's interest for the board and

president both to speak well of the school and the best features of the outgoing administration. If the president has made a substantial contribution, the entire board should join in recognizing and celebrating that.

And then the cycle, beginning with the setting of a strategic direction for the administration to come, should start again. ■

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