

A menu of wise practices for boards

RECRUITMENT, ORIENTATION, EDUCATION, AND EVALUATION ARE KEYS TO BOARD EFFECTIVENESS

Over the past few years, the board of directors of the In Trust Center has modified some of its practices to improve the effectiveness of our board. We hope that by sharing practices that have been effective for us, theological school leaders might glean ideas for their own boards.

RECRUITMENT

Nothing is more important to the health and sustainability of an organization than recruiting qualified and committed board members.

An organized recruitment process will serve as a foundation for building a strong and diverse board. Clearly defined expectations for board members should be documented and boards should always discern the skills and experiences it needs at that point in time.

What does the In Trust Center board do?

- **We task** the governance committee with overseeing a multistep recruitment process for new board members. This includes looking for and contacting candidates, explaining the board roles and responsibilities, introducing candidates to the full board, and submitting nominations.
- **We refer** to our spreadsheet that includes information on current board members including demographic data (the length of each member's term, geographic region, religious denomination, race, and gender) and other information such as professional expertise, community connections, and affiliations with organizations relevant to our organization's mission. Frequent reference to this document during the recruitment process ensures that the candidates we are considering have the right blend of skills and perspectives to align with our strategies, goals, and needs, both now and in the future.

Who are the key players and what do they do?

Governance committee: Oversees the recruitment process.

President: Often tasked by the governance committee with identifying and speaking to candidates and answering their questions.

How can theological school boards apply this to their own work?

- **Task** a board committee with overseeing and executing the recruitment process.
- **Ensure** that bylaws, especially related to board recruitment and eligibility, are current.
- **Write and maintain** a statement of board member expectations.

ORIENTATION

Introducing new members to the board's goals and practices should be a formal and deliberate process that ensures all board members operate within the same framework and with the same instructions.

Orientation should include an introduction to the landscape of theological education; a review of the organization, including its history, mission, programs, and how it operates; the role of the board within the overall institutional structure; and the individual duties of and expectations for board members, including expectations for giving.

What does the In Trust Center do?

- **We provide** new members with access to our bylaws, policies, and all governing documents and then schedule a video call to discuss them in the months before the new member's first board meeting.
- **We hold** an annual orientation for new members on the evening before a board meeting. New members are expected to attend and all board members are encouraged to attend as a refresher and to contribute to the experience of new members.

Who are the key players and what do they do?

President and governance committee chair: Describe areas of board leadership, governance, oversight, and committees at the annual orientation.

Governance committee chair: Explains expectations to each new board member, including expectations for financial support.

Other board members: Serve as mentors and check in on new board members during their first year on the board.

Senior staff members: Give a presentation at the annual orientation on institutional history, mission, and programmatic areas.

How can theological school boards apply this to their own work?

- **Create** a process and timeline for orientation that allows for sharing information with new members over time and providing opportunities for periodic check-ins.
- **Design** a framework for board member orientation, considering everything that should be included, including possible meetings with vice presidents, deans, faculty, and others.

BUILDING COMMUNITY

The most effective boards are composed of those who show commitment and support not only for the institution they serve, but also for their fellow board members. Boards that make a deliberate effort to build rapport and trust have freer discussions, are better able to speak up, debate and challenge when necessary, and come up with better solutions than those who overlook this important component.

What does the In Trust Center do?

- **We begin** each meeting with a spiritual reflection led by a board member, setting an appropriate tone.
- **We schedule** a full hour at the beginning of each meeting for board members to share personal updates — both joys and concerns — and build opportunities for forging deeper connections.

Who are the key players and what do they do?

Board chair and president: Appoint a board member to lead the spiritual reflection.

All board members: Share updates and join in meals and other opportunities for fellowship throughout each board meeting.

How can theological school boards apply this to their own work?

- **Incorporate** worship or devotions into the board meeting — either prayer, or private worship in the boardroom, or public worship with students and faculty (perhaps at a regularly scheduled chapel service). Worship is a good way to remind board members why they are involved.
- **Plan** other community-building exercises such as dinners or off-campus retreats.
- **Consider** other opportunities to build strong, trusting relationships among board members.

EDUCATION

Reading and addressing reports is an essential part of a board's job. The best boards also spend time educating themselves and engaging in strategic thinking about issues relevant to their work.

What does the In Trust Center do?

- **We build** educational activities into each board meeting to provide information on general trends and important issues in the field or to give in-depth accounts of particular initiatives and opportunities.
- **We invite** one or two outside experts to at least one board meeting each year, asking them to make a presentation on a topic relevant to the board's work.

Who are the key players and what do they do?

Governance committee: Determines topics for the board to address throughout the year. Invites subject experts to lead board education sessions.

President and senior staff members: Present educational information at all board meetings.

How can theological school boards apply this to their own work?

- **Determine** what your board needs to know. Should you focus on trends, examine data from the Association of Theological Schools, or gain a deeper understanding of stakeholders (such as donors and denominational leaders)? Are you preparing for a big transition in the coming year?
- **Consider** bringing in a facilitator or expert to lead the board through a process of engaged learning.

SELF-EVALUATION

The board is responsible for evaluating the institution and the president, and it is also responsible for evaluating its own effectiveness. The best boards conduct self-evaluation regularly.

What does the In Trust Center do?

- **We hire** an external consultant to lead the board through a formal self-evaluation at regular intervals.
- **We ask** each board member, as part of the formal self-evaluation, to complete an online assessment. A consultant reviews the data and prepares a report for the board only.
- **We schedule** a dedicated and executive education session with the consultant, discussing the results of the assessment and charting a path toward growth and development.

Who are the key players and what do they do?

Board chair and governance committee chair: Assume leadership in deciding how the board can assess its own performance.

President: Takes part in the discussions after potential conflicts of interest are identified. A president should not direct the board assessment if the board is responsible for hiring (and possibly firing) the president.

How can theological school boards apply this to their own work?

- **Review** the board's practice of self-assessment.
- **Engage** in regular assessment of the board and consider the board's own plan for development.

LEADERSHIP & COMMITTEES

All boards have designated leaders — a chair and other officers responsible for the board's direction. Most also have committees, and this is where much of the detailed work of governance takes place. Effective boards take time to examine their committee structures, charters, and practices, overhauling them when needed.

What does the In Trust Center do?

- **We elect** officers every year to serve as chair, vice chair, secretary, and treasurer.
- **We appoint** members of five standing committees — executive, finance, investment, audit, and governance committees — some of which meet once a year, and others that meet three or more times, either by videoconference or in person.

Who are the key players and what do they do?

Executive Committee: Includes the four officers plus the chairs of the four other standing committees.

Full board: Each member serves on at least one committee. The president and the board chair serve as ex officio members of all committees.

Staff members: Serve as committee liaisons when appropriate.

How can theological school boards apply this to their own work?

- **Review** the board's governing documents, including committee charters, if any, to ensure the roles of officers and committees are clearly defined.
- **Discuss** whether the current practices and committee structure are working efficiently. Should any committees be merged?
- **Assign** the task of updating committee charters to the governance committee.
- **Explore** using technology to make committee work more effective. Can committees meet by videoconference? If they are working collaboratively on a program or report, can they use a collaborative authoring program like Google Docs — or even more sophisticated methods?

FEEDBACK

It is important to obtain feedback from both current and outgoing board members. Long-serving outgoing members can share valuable institutional and board history and even outgoing members who have served briefly may have insights that can help the board with suggestions for improvement.

What does the In Trust Center do?

- **We schedule** a two-part executive session at every board meeting. The president is present for the first half of the executive session, but not for the second half, so that board members can express their views freely.
- **We distribute** an electronic survey to board members after each meeting to gather feedback.
- **We conduct** exit interviews with departing board members.

- **We conduct** longer interviews about institutional history with key board members who have served during pivotal times.

Who are the key players and what do they do?

Board chair: Presides over executive sessions, communicating information and action items to the president when appropriate.

Governance committee and president: Create and conduct surveys on board member feedback.

Governance committee and full board: Approve exit interview questions (for all departing members) and select interviewees and questions for longer institutional history interviews.

How can theological school boards apply this to their own work?

- **Consider** how to receive input from board members on meeting effectiveness and future meeting structure by asking questions such as “Was there enough time allotted for strategic conversations?”
- **Assess** how the board gathers feedback from exiting board members or retains institutional history.

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