



ESSENTIAL 2: Our board was at its best when . . .

The board takes responsibility for its readiness to govern well.

SUMMARY

Not long ago, a gathering of theological school presidents and board leaders were asked to complete the sentence: “Our board was at its best when . . . “ The responses created an inspiring image of boards in action – trusting, honest, transparent, unafraid, empowering, like-minded, courageous, collegial, open to change, and more.

- A president described how the value of board discussions reminds trustees “that they actually like each other and of their shared common mission.”
- A board chair spoke of how inviting the Holy Spirit into their deliberations leads to better outcomes – an acknowledgment of the sacred dimension of their work.
- Another governance leader referenced the experience of trustees, faculty, and administration coming together around shared governance.

Certainly, there have been challenges for many boards and the institutions they serve, some still fresh in the speakers’ minds. Despite these hurdles, the most battle-weary in the group expressed pride in their board’s resilience during tough times. “We acted well, and we’re better for it,” a board chair remarked.

However, mentions of a board’s best moments during times of relative stability were less common among the group. As one president observed, “It’s more difficult to think about this topic when we’re doing well as an institution.”

A CONCLUDING THOUGHT

Leaders are advised to learn from their mistakes, but as the governance peers noted, valuable lessons also come from our successes. We need to share the stories of board heroics under all circumstances, so to remember and replicate the moments when our board was at its best. This practice helps create a legacy of mission fulfillment and economic sustainability. Wise stewards understand this and have stories to illustrate it.

QUESTIONS TO ASK BOARDS

- Why do you think it's easier for boards to ask tough questions and come together when faced with a crisis than in calmer times? (Speculative)
- How can we foster a sense of urgency, ensuring that boards perform at their best regardless of institutional circumstances, with members remaining engaged and on task whether faced with both crisis or calm, good times or bad? (Productive)
- In a time of stability, what questions should we ask to help move the institution forward? (Speculative)



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