The board's responsibility for evaluating the president

The result of presidential evaluation should be a stronger partnership between board and president and enhanced performance by the leadership team.

It's the responsibility of the governing board to provide the president with an annual performance evaluation. It's also a task that many board members prefer not to tackle — and so they don't. For their part, presidents who have endured a poorly executed evaluation in years past may be relieved, at least in the short term, if the board shirks its responsibility. As a result, there are many presidents who have been on the job for several years without formal feedback from their boards.

But the majority of leaders in theological schools — board members and presidents alike — understand that improved performance depends upon giving and receiving regular feedback. Many have experienced first hand that individual leaders, governing boards, and entire institutions garner significant benefits from well-conducted assessment of the president's performance.

Evaluation of the president may lead to:

- A stronger board/president partnership
- The opportunity to model the power of mutual accountability
- Enhanced legitimacy of the presidential office

As organizational theorist Ram Charan promises, "The board's greatest opportunity to add value is to ensure that the [organization] has the right CEO at all times. Nothing else compares."

Start early and stick with it

To board members who have recently welcomed a new president, talk of evaluation and performance expectations can feel like too much, too soon. Wise boards, however, understand that nothing says "we care" like committing to a regular rhythm of feedback and assessment, beginning in the first year of a presidency and continuing to the last.

As described in *Ten Basic Responsibilities of Nonprofit Boards* (BoardSource), "the primary purpose of performance reviews is to help the chief executive perform more effectively and to proactively and constructively address any performance issues." Whether mandated in the bylaws of the school, outlined in the employment agreement with the president, or the outgrowth of the informal agreement between board leadership and the head of the school, regular and timely evaluation is a gift from the board to the president and by extension, to the institution.

At its best, assessment is proactive. An annual performance review is the board's best tool for nipping problems in the bud; for cultivating the good and weeding out the bad before it takes root. The care the board brings to each step in the evaluative process contributes to trust building, openness, and greater collegiality within the seminary community. And as the board takes responsibility for the evaluation process, individual members gain a better understanding of the president's responsibilities, stresses, joys, and effectiveness.

Two modes of evaluation

Performance evaluations of a seminary president take two forms: informal (annual) and formal (periodic), with the first of the two modes dominating over the course of the usual presidency.

Annual review. In most years, the review of the president's performance is limited in scope, conversational in tone, and informed by the president's position description, his or her goals for the particular year, and a written self-assessment. In some instances, all members of the board and perhaps the president's senior administrative team are invited to speak into the evaluation process.

For a healthy presidency, the annual review is a cumulation or summation of ongoing give and take, feedback, and response from the board, through the chair. There should be no surprises when the review rolls around — for the president or the board.

The annual review is led by the board chair or other designated board member, without the aid of a consultant.

Elements of an annual review usually include:

- A written self-assessment prepared by the president based on their goals for the year.
- A brief survey designed to elicit board members' perceptions of the president's performance in meeting expectations of the position and their own goals for the year.
- A meeting (face-to-face, if possible) between the president and the designated reviewer.
- A follow-up report from the designated reviewer to the full board.
- A letter from the board chair to the president, confirming the discussion and agreed-upon actions for the coming year.

From there, the evaluation cycle starts over as the president shares his or her goals for the coming year with the president and others on the board.

Comprehensive evaluation. Every three to five years, boards are encouraged to engage in a more thorough evaluation of the president's performance. This is sometimes referred to as a 360-degree review or deep-dive analysis that incorporates input from a broad swath of institutional stakeholders, including the president's senior administrative team, other administrators and staff, and faculty. Occasionally alumni, donors, and friends are also invited to participate by responding to an online survey tool. Many boards find it helpful to engage a consultant to assist with a comprehensive evaluation.

A comprehensive evaluation provides trustees with a window into how the president is perceived by individuals external to the institution. The comprehensive approach also provides a deep-dive understanding of how direct reports and others within the institution have experienced the president's leadership over a several year time frame. The questions asked and the weight given to the responses is determined by what the board wants to learn from each of the interview groups.

In light of the more expansive purpose, a comprehensive review usually includes:

- A written self-assessment prepared by the president based on their goals for the past three to five years.
- An online survey tool augmented by in-person interviews with selected individuals, including all members of the board. Survey questions should be specific to the institutional context, the president's job description, and expectations identified in the annual evaluations. It should include an assessment of the president's performance in meeting the board's expectations and their own goals for the year.
- A meeting (face-to-face, if possible) between the president and the designated reviewer.
- A follow-up report from the designate reviewer to the full board.
- A letter from the board chair to the president, confirming the discussion and agreed-upon actions for the coming year.

As with the annual review, when the reporting has been completed, the evaluation cycle starts over as the president shares his or her goals for the coming year with the board.

To do good, not harm

No board sets out to make a mess of presidential evaluation, and yet the landscape of theological education is littered with the remains of performance reviews gone wrong. Attention to the following issues can help ensure that evaluation process does good, not harm.

Consider the context. Although an apparent godsend for busy boards, off-the-shelf assessment instruments aren't the best choice in a seminary setting. As convenient as these tools can be, prepackaged instruments don't capture the nuances of a specific presidency or institutional context. Boilerplate questions and prepackaged surveys can skew respondents' attention in directions that are less important to the goals, mission, priorities, and challenges of a particular school or presidency.

Survey and interview questions are of greatest value when focused on the president's strengths and likelihood for achieving the institution's short- and long-term aspirations, along with the president's own goals for the year. That said, a judicial use of borrowed questions isn't out of bounds. The presidency of a specific theological school may be idiosyncratic, but the generally accepted characteristics of successful leadership are similar across institutional types and sizes.

Consider the timing. Presidential evaluation is sensitive work even in the best of times, but there are years when events within and/or external to the institution up the possibility of the review going wrong. Board leadership is wise to think twice before moving ahead with a 360-degree review of the president if one or more of the following factors is in play:

- The school is in the midst of major change such as a merger, downsizing, or presidential transition.
- Faculty and staff members are experiencing survey fatigue from other institutional projects.
- There's a high degree of mistrust within the institution.
- Members of the campus community haven't been adequately schooled in the developmental purposes of presidential evaluation.
- Expertise isn't available to accurately and objectively summarize the results.

A poorly timed presidential evaluation may be worse that none at all.

Focus on learning. Presidential evaluation is first and foremost about learning — by the head of the school, members of the board, and all who participates in the process. The president should emerge from a performance review affirmed in his or her strengths and assured of support in addressing weaknesses. When there is a divergence of perception, the president's openness to learning from the review process makes the resolution of disparate judgments easier to achieve.

A thoughtfully conducted presidential evaluation serves a twofold purpose: to provide opportunity for reflection on the performance of the entire organization (not just the individual), and to encourage a calibration of expectations and goals between the president and the board. As described in *The Nonprofit Board Answer Book*, the annual performance review should confirm the strength of organizational systems, programs, and staff productivity. Presidential evaluation also highlights public perceptions of the organization and the depth of support for the school and trust in its leader.

Most often the evaluation process, whether annual or comprehensive, confirms the worthiness of the president to continue in his or her role for at least another year — or longer. If the resulting report comes absent a single critique or suggestion for improvement, however, the evaluation has failed in its purpose. Evaluations that turn up nothing but praise may stroke egos, but they're not all that helpful for presidents who sincerely desire to grow in their jobs. Thoughtful leaders know they're not perfect, and presidents who are secure in their leadership welcome constructive feedback.

Focus on the future. Assessing past performance is the easy part of presidential evaluation. As the saying goes, hindsight is 20/20. However, boards must not stop there. To be of greatest value to the board, the president, and the institutional, the evaluation process needs a future focus as well. Times change and so must presidential leadership.

If a president has been in place for more than a few years, there's the strong likelihood that the institutional context into which he or she was called is very different from that of the present. Boards must be prepared to redirect the focus of evaluation from a backward glance to a forward focus. The goal is to maximize the successes (and failures) of what has been as a prelude to what comes next. Presidents become more effective and confident in their leadership through forward-facing evaluations.

Despite the board's best hopes, there is the possibility that a deep-dive assessment of the president's performance may uncover issues that aren't easily corrected with a professional development plan, executive coaching, or a change in attitude. Should termination be deemed necessary, the board should act quickly to protect the institution, but with grace and Christian charity so as not to cause undue harm to the individual.

After presidential evaluation, then what?

Presidential evaluation provides the impetus — the nudge — for annual goal setting and implementation plans. These goals and plans, in turn, become the touch point for the next year's evaluation of the president's effectiveness in guiding the institution to even greater mission effectiveness. When correctly developed and executed, the board's evaluation of presidential performance contributes to learning and trust for all involved. The review process serves as both an affirmation of what's working well and as a catalyst for change.

The watchwords of presidential evaluation are trust, mutuality, and faithfulness. Boards approach the responsibility of evaluating the president hopeful that the findings will be accepted by the leader as a gift, not as a reprimand. And presidents, while secure in their boards' support of their leadership, expect that board members will put first the well-being of the institution and its mission. When these hopes and expectations come together, the partnership between board and president is strengthened and the stage is set for enhanced performance of the leadership team.

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Sources

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