

PRESERVING THE IDENTITY OF THE GOVERNANCE PROCESS

BY CARLOS A. ARCHBOLD

The board of trustees of the local Adventist college had just returned from their annual retreat. On this occasion, the board assessed its own performance and the relevance of the institution's vision and mission statements to its various constituencies. As the trustees reviewed the school's updated strategic plan, the duties of some board committees were adjusted to serve the institution more effectively. The institution as a whole welcomed the board's initiatives and embarked on a new academic year with a renewed sense of achievement.

A number of Adventist institutions experience this sort of commitment from their boards through the governance process. Unfortunately, at other schools, the boards do not function as well. Why do some institutions experience the blessings of a committed board while others do not? This is not an easy question to answer. Usually, when a school board is ineffective, people blame the members. Under some circumstances, they may be responsible, but they may be confronted with challenges that negatively affect their performance.¹

What exactly is the role of a higher education board? From one perspective, it is

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management; from another it is governance. Quite often the difference is evident only in which responsibilities belong to the administration and which to the board. School management functions have been studied and analyzed, but governance functions have been somewhat neglected in research. A quote from

Boards That Make a Difference highlights the situation of some governing boards: "where opportunity for leadership is greatest, job design is poorest."² Since many administrators also lack for-



mal training for governance, Adventist educational institutions, particularly in developing countries, may grapple with a number of issues that impede board performance.

1. An Unfamiliar Process

In a few places within the Adventist educational world, board members receive a thorough orientation about their role and responsibility as a trustee. Although this clearly enhances board performance, is not the common practice in many Adventist educational institutions. In fact, there is little understanding of terms such as “trustee,” “governance,” or even “governing board.” In many countries, governance is confused with administration. Many people join a school board with the firm conviction that their primary responsibility is to “administrate.” Unfortunately, many institutions have an ill-defined and poorly understood administrative and governance model, so individuals who serve on

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their boards receive little guidance regarding their duties and responsibilities. Many times those who need them most

cannot obtain even the basic guidelines of how board governance works for non-profit organizations and educational institutions because of technical difficulties in accessing the information, language barriers, and administrative resistance to incorporating new ideas that could threaten traditional practices and ideas about leadership.

It is generally assumed that individuals who serve on the board of an educational institution volunteer their time and effort because of some level of commitment to the cause. In some parts of the Adventist world, however, except for a few lay representa-



Lowell Cooper, Loma Linda University board chair, congratulates Ruthita Fike (CEO of the Loma Linda University Medical Center) and Richard Hart (then CEO of Loma Linda University, now president of Loma Linda University Adventist Health Sciences Center), with Lyn Behrens (former president of LLUAHSC) in the background.

tives, the board members are individuals who, by virtue of their administrative position in the church structure, inherit a position on the governing board. This can create varying perceptions of board members' roles. It is possible that laypersons who are asked to serve as volunteers perceive their role as "ownership," while those who inherit their positions view theirs as "helpfulness interest," or vice versa. It is therefore extremely important for all board members to receive adequate orientation regard-

ing the role of the trustee and how the governance process differs from church administration.

2. Mixed Identity

Another problem that contributes to poor board performance is the application of church board procedures in meetings of college trustees. Many church leaders have to wear different hats. Usually the board chair of an educational institution is the highest-ranking official of the church system in that region, and the majority of board members are administrators of sub-structures of the regional organization. Using the customary church board procedures instead of governance procedures could cause the board to mismanage its function and lose its identity.

Having served on boards for many years, I remember

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The board of the Bulgarian Theological Seminary, Sophia, Bulgaria, in September 2007.



West-Central African Division Universities Council meeting at Valley View University, Accra, Ghana, in February 2008.

many times being a participant in the school board version of musical chairs. One minute we were in a union committee meeting, a few minutes later we had converted into a college board meeting, then back to the union committee meeting to give final approval to an item relating to another part of the organizational structure.

Some may argue that since the majority of members belong to both entities anyhow, this simply saves time and expedites the decision-making process. However, the practice diffuses the identity of the governing board.

A board decision is the collective voice of a group of people who arrive at a consensus on a particular issue, and after adequate research and consultation, create a policy to address the issue. This task is often difficult; and if in addition they cannot stand on their own, they easily succumb to pressure from the

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other levels of the church organization or special interest groups. Board members need to give their full attention to the best interests of the institution while they are in session. Closed sessions attended by only school trustees offer the members an opportunity to be candid and to explore a variety of options without fear of pressure or retribution.

3. The Approval Syndrome

When members of a governing board are unclear about their



Walla Walla University board in session, March 2007.



A recent board of trustees meeting at Oakwood University, Huntsville, Alabama.

responsibilities, the built-up frustration can cause them to lose interest and commitment to the task. Instead of functioning as a policy-formulating body, they become overwhelmed with non-essential issues. Quite often this produces the “rubber-stamp syndrome.” After much nitpicking and lengthy discussion, they approve everything, even items belonging to administration, if they happen to get on the agenda. In Carver’s words, “the governance process becomes ritualistic, trivializing, and bottlenecking.”³

These three scenarios are closely related. Lack of adequate information on process can lead to confusion of roles and poor performance. They are also related to the administrative practices of the church and can be corrected if church leadership becomes aware of these scenarios, recognizes the need for a legitimate governance process, and facilitates its implementation.

Understanding the Governance Process

Throughout the world, the Adventist Church uses a system of boards and committees for decision making. As its educational system developed, the trustee-governing board model was adopted, but in many locations was not fully implemented. In this model, the governing board is at the top of the institutional pyramid. It is therefore of crucial importance that this entity function effectively and provide adequate support to the administrators and teachers to enable the institution to successfully meet the challenges of the present and future. Even if an institution has supportive alumni, a loyal student body, a committed faculty, and capable administrators, it still needs an effective board

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to maintain the course charted by its mission and vision statements.

In the trustee-governing board model of educational administration, the board is the owner “in trust” of a larger group of stakeholders—church members, parents, and supporters. Because board members are accountable to the constituency, the governance process must adhere to certain specific parameters.

The literature attributes the following responsibilities (known in some circles as “the reserved powers”⁴) to the governing board:

- Appoint and dismiss the president*
- Sell or purchase property*
- Approve long-range plans*
- Ensure the well-being of faculty, students, and staff*
- Ensure strong administrative and financial management*
- Review the mission statement*
- Interpret the campus to the community*
- Monitor its own performance*

Even though these are vital tasks, Adventist boards have another responsibility that is just as important and necessary. According to Kerr and Gade, board members are “guardians” of the most important trust, the values and integrity of the sponsor-

ing organization.⁵ A quote from Ellen G. White about the spiritual responsibility of the trustee illuminates this point.

“The trustees should ever realize that they are under the divine eye, and act with a continual sense that, as finite men, they are liable to make mistakes in laying plans unless they are closely connected with God and are seeking to have every deficiency removed from their characters. The divine standard must be met. Everyone who serves in board meetings needs to seek most earnestly the wisdom from above. The transforming grace of Christ should be felt in every meeting. Then the influence of the spirit of Christ upon the hearts of those present will place a right mold upon their work.”⁶

From this perspective, governing boards can become the ethical and moral conscience of the institution. “Guarding the trust” is more than “fiscal responsibility;” it is also “spiritual leadership” and an opportunity to incorporate the integration of faith in policy design and decision-making processes.

In their role as guardians, board members can craft policies

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that influence the total corporate structure of the institution and secure the support and loyalty of those constituencies that the institution serves. The board should avoid the extremes of appearing too strong, and thus becoming a watchdog, or being too weak to achieve its goals, and thus becoming irrelevant.

- The board will ensure that the institutional image is a model of integrity and Christian values.

- It will weigh all functions and decisions against the standards set by the fundamental beliefs of the church.

- It will address controversial issues and threats by being proactive rather than reactive.

- It will recognize the importance of effective use of time and design its decision-making process accordingly.

- It will monitor the performance of the administrative team as it provides the maximum support to these individuals.

- It will monitor the level of satisfaction within the institution to secure and maintain a highly motivated and committed teaching and support staff.

The board must walk the delicate but important fine line between being involved enough to know what is happening in the



General Conference Vice President Ella Smith Simmons conducts board training in the East-Central Africa Division in November 2007.

institution and yet maintaining its distance to avoid involving itself in management functions. In everything it does, the governing board must keep the mission and vision statements alive and visible.

Streamlining the Governance Process

Once the trustee/governing board model is adopted, a major task of the board must be to determine whether its composition and internal structure are adequate to perform these duties. Normally, each member of the governing board is assigned to one or more board committees. These committees are vital to the success of the governing board. If they are empowered to actually perform their duties within the assigned parameters and without external pressures, the board will function more effectively. Consider, for example, two important committees: the Trustee Selection (or Governance) Committee, which is responsible for selecting new board members; and the Search Committee, which selects candidates for the presidency of the institution. A brief discussion of the responsibilities of these committees will illustrate the point.

The Trustee Selection Committee

Fundamental to the success of a governing board is its ability to harness the individual views and opinions of each member so that this synergy will set the standard of operation for the board and for the institution as well. In addition to overcoming the barriers previously discussed, the board will also need to have the right combination of people for the process to work. A major role of this committee is to find the proper mix and to provide appropriate orientation to all new board members—those who have

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been appointed as well as those who have inherited a seat on the board. Once the board has been properly constituted, this committee must monitor the group's efficiency and effectiveness as a governing body, and work with members who need to improve their performance. This can be both a very sensitive and ambitious task; however, if both the board and church leaders are aware of the trustees' role as guardian of the organizational values, the process will be welcomed.⁷

The Presidential Search Committee

The search for a college or university president is an important milestone in the history of the institution. The board and administration will need to collaborate on this aspect of governance.

Before a search committee is appointed, the board should be quite clear on the purposes of the committee and the qualities its members should possess. The process for selecting members should be carefully thought out. The size and composition of the

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committee will depend on the nature of the institution. Members should not be selected for political reasons, or out of fear of retaliation by influential people who were not selected. The composition of search committees, as Birnbaum has noted, often represents “a tacit negotiation that reflects the balance of influence on campus.”⁸ This is an opportunity for the board and administration to learn how teachers and staff actually feel about the institution. It is also an occasion for constituents to have their voices heard.

Another benefit of the search process is the knowledge that the board will gain about the institution's current and projected needs. The search committee must understand the job requirements before they can assess the qualities of a possible president and make the right selection. If all this is done right, it will send

a positive message to the constituency about the board's integrity in the governing process.

If board committees work well, the board as a whole will work well, and the institution will reap the benefits.

Many Adventist educational institutions around the world are facing tremendous challenges with finances, staffing, and the upholding of church principles. It's time for the church leadership to take a second look at how the “governance process” is interpreted and implemented worldwide, and facilitate the changes that will improve board performance where this is needed. ✍



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