POINT OF VIEW

How to Keep Trustees From Being Micromanagers

At least publicly, most college presidents speak kindly of their governing boards -- behavior probably motivated by two parts sincerity and one part diplomacy. They extol their trustees' dedication, expertise, and largess, usually in that order, although over a drink with peers the sequence often gets reversed. Similarly, presidents rarely complain openly about their boards, and certainly not when trustees are within earshot.

Compliments and circumspection on the president's part, however, should not be mistaken for contentment. Over the years, as a faculty member at the Harvard Seminar for New Presidents and as a governance consultant, I have heard presidents privately express a litany of concerns about their boards. The most severe criticisms leveled at trustees by CEO's of public colleges are blatant partisanship and obstinate allegiance to the priorities of a particular constituency rather than the overall welfare of the institution. Presidents of both private and public institutions resent the exercise of undue personal influence by trustees in areas like admissions or athletics and the pursuit of self-interest, whether done cunningly or crassly. Thankfully, such worries are not widespread. Far more commonly, presidents lament that boards are unprepared, disengaged, and factious, and that some trustees combine an apparent disdain for academic mores with an uncritical acceptance of corporate culture.

But all those concerns pale against the one nearly universal complaint: that trustees chronically fail to distinguish between policy and administration and, as a result, delve into managerial matters and operational decisions. In fact, the problem is so pervasive and permanent that the syndrome has been encapsulated in a single dreaded word: micromanagement.

Most presidents subscribe to a standard solution to the problem: Clarify the board's roles with a definitive description of its responsibilities. Therefore, most institutions have bylaws or formal statements that delineate and, tacitly or explicitly, limit the scope of the board's "job." The conventional list of responsibilities includes setting the mission, ratifying the strategy, appointing and evaluating the president, approving the budget, enhancing and conserving tangible assets, and advocating the institution's interests. The holy grail is a clear division of labor between management and the board. Make sure trustees know what they are there to do, and then hold them to it.

That is a curious approach given that the specificity of job descriptions is almost always inversely related to the organization chart. The lower a job ranks in the hierarchy, the more detailed the tasks. Just as orderlies have less discretion than doctors, universities provide much more direction, for instance, to custodians and security guards than to deans and vice presidents. Most college presidents would be distressed if their cabinet members were poring over their job descriptions daily to determine what they should or should not do. And what if presidents themselves could only do what their job descriptions expressly prescribe? Yet, at the pinnacle of the organization, many presidents yearn to stipulate the trustees' tasks and limit their latitude. It's hard to imagine that a board, any more than a president, can codify its way to greatness, and both parties should have loftier goals than legislating damage control.

A more fruitful strategy starts with an analysis of the root causes of the problem. While some academics may believe otherwise, the vast majority of trustees do not awaken each day in dire search of mundane problems to fix over at the university. Equally few are fulfilled by meetings about minutiae or chances to tinker at the margins of daily operations. To the contrary, most board members in "real life" are motivated and engaged by complex problems of substantial importance. So what happens when they pass through the college gates?
Three forces combine to cultivate micromanagement. First, boards are structured to micromanage. The trustees’ standing committees typically replicate the college’s organization chart, mirroring and monitoring administrative functions—admissions, academic affairs, finance, and student life. In effect, every senior officer has a shadow cabinet of sidewalk superintendents at the ready.

Second, trustees are invited to micromanage. Senior administrators often treat board members as pro bono management consultants. As lawyers, engineers, architects, investment bankers, or corporate executives, trustees are asked to contribute technical expertise on various provisions and details of plans, policies, and projects. If the devil is in the details, then small wonder that trustees sometimes appear devilish.

Finally, trustees are relegated to micromanagement. College presidents aspire to be inspirational leaders, not mere managers. Such leaders shape the institution’s vision, values, and culture; set the organization’s agenda; devise a strategy to succeed; and then make meaning of what unfolds. Laudable ambitions to be sure, but if made the exclusive province of presidents, then what remains for trustees?

This diagnosis suggests that boards should depend less on standing committees designed to oversee operations and rely more on ad hoc work groups linked to institutional priorities. Think presidential search committee and then apply the template to diversity, technology, cost containment, or any other strategic imperative. However useful, such structural changes go only so far.

The ultimate antidote to micromanagement is macro-engagement. Colleges should immerse trustees in discussions where complex problems worthy of elegant solutions are first framed; where wisdom, insight, and empathy matter more than technical expertise; where organizational culture, values, and traditions are at issue; where the intention is to make sense of circumstances rather than make policies and pass resolutions; and where robust discourse displaces *Robert’s Rules of Order*. If trustees join conversations that concern governance, trustees will govern; when exposed to matters of management, board members will manage.

In the following examples, notice how the board’s role tilts either toward governance or management depending upon the trustees’ point of entry into the discussion.

**Upstream:** What sustains student consumerism and the campus-amenities arms race, and what principles shall guide the institution’s response? **Downstream:** Should we publish student course evaluations? Should we include climbing walls and hot tubs in the new fitness center?

**Upstream:** What are the values of the new generation of professionals about the balance between work and family, and how accommodating should we be? **Downstream:** To curb excessive turnover of faculty and staff members, should we revise the college’s incentive structure and leave policy? Should we add on-campus day care, and, if so, should the facility be self-managed or outsourced?

**Upstream:** How do organizations build enviable reputations, and what reputation do we, as an institution, want to cultivate with what audiences? **Downstream:** What can we do to improve our ranking in *U.S. News & World Report*? How can we attract more media attention?

In each example, the upstream questions precipitate macroengagement and tap the board’s collective wisdom and experience. By contrast, the downstream questions promote micromanagement.

Reinforced by some senior administrators and professors, more than a few presidents hesitate to pose the right questions to boards. In some instances, the president may distrust the trustees’ instincts, motives, or comprehension, or some combination thereof, or the president may fear the reaction of others on the campus if the board were party to discussions of substantive topics. In other cases, a CEO, certain of the “right” answer, may see only a downside to board involvement, especially at the early stages when some trustees might presume that the question, never mind the president’s answer, is still up for grabs.

Make no mistake, macroengagement raises the ante. Defining the problem shapes the solution, much as framing the question conditions doing the research. And when assumptions, values, beliefs, and principles must be confronted and reconciled, the stakes only intensify. For those reasons, skeptical presidents accept micromanagement as the lesser of two evils.
There is an alternative. Presidents and trustees could fashion a new covenant: more macroengagement in exchange for less micromanagement. With meaningful participation upstream, trustees have more occasions to "first-guess" with the CEO about the nature of the problem and, consequently, less reason and right to second-guess downstream about implementation of the solution. In this scenario, the holy grail is not a precise division of labor, but rather a general meeting of the minds.

If the president doesn't involve trustees in deciding what needs to be decided, then one or more of four complications will arise: The board will become detached and indifferent (a huge problem when the president needs the trustees' moral, financial, and political support); the board will conclude at the midnight hour that management addressed the wrong problem; board members will largely pursue matters of personal interest; or trustees will plunge headlong into administrative portfolios where opportunities to micromanage are abundant and territorial sensitivities are acute.

It is undoubtedly an overstatement to assert that presidents always get the boards they deserve. Yet it is not too much to claim that presidents, more than anyone else, direct a board's focus and steer a board's energy. The surest and swiftest way for presidents to extricate their trustees from the morass of micromanagement is to engage them sooner and more deeply, with more questions than answers on essential issues.

For presidents concerned that their boards may be insufficiently wise, knowledgeable, or competent to be a source of leadership for the institution beyond fiduciary oversight and philanthropic support, it might be well for them to remember that those same trustees were smart enough to recruit, reward, and retain them as presidents.

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Smart State savages staff representation

GOVERNANCE | GUY HEALY

The "progressive" Beattie Government has mandated relations with the industrial wing of the Labor movement according to "savages" to academic, general and student representation on the Queensland university councils under the new National Governance Protocols.

The National Tertiary Education Union and the mostly left-affiliated student organisations are set to lose a total of 15 ex-officio appointments on five university councils alone under draft legislation to enact Queensland's response to the federally driven protocols.

It is believed Queensland is among the first of the states to introduce the legislation to qualify for extra Commonwealth funding — of up to $2.5 million for the universities — that was tied to the Higher Education Act reforms brought down in the 2005 Federal Budget.

The extraordinary changes to university governing bodies have also been made in defiance of numerous meetings, advice and protest from the NTEU that the changes were "unacceptable".

It is understood that the Amendment Bill supporting the reforms appears to be implementing the request from the current councils.

The "most savage reduction" in academic staff representation was proposed for the UQ Senate, NTEU Queensland division head Dr Howard Guille said Campus Review.

Guille claimed UQ's academic staff representation would be reduced from four to three or two, while its total academic, general and student representation would be reduced to four in 22.

"The president of the UQ Union would also lose the position's vote on council, since the position is barred from membership by the Protocols.

"We believe this will reflect very badly on the most prestigious university in the State. This is matter for all university staff and is way beyond a union-only issue," he said.

However UQ's secracies and registrar, Douglas Porter, defended the proposed changes to the UQ Act as the minimum as comply with the National Governance Protocols — 35 to 22 members remaining the high proportion of external membership, which has never been less than two-thirds.

"Academic staff representation would be reduced from five to three and general staff from two to one, while elected student representation would remain as two," he said.

The president of the UQ Union is likely to be invited to attend meetings as a participative but non-voting observer, he said.

"Governance representation would also reduce from 11 of 35 to 8 of 22 and student representation from 6 of 35 to 3 of 22," he said.

Elsewhere, Central Queensland and Southern Queensland reduced their academic staff representation by two-thirds, Griffith's by half and Sunshine Coast by a third, according to the NTEU analysis of the draft University Legislation Amendment Bill 2005.

In contrast, Guille said the proposals for both James Cook University and the Queensland University of Technology "seemed supportable" from both a staff and student point of view.

The new councils would be the maximum size, and staff and student representation was maintained apart from the loss of the ex-officio appointment of the NTEU president at JCU, Guille said.

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"Given that the Queensland and Education Minister, Dr Peter Beattie, is a non-unionist who is trying to drive through the changes to the Protocols,..."

"The Queensland Minister is using the funding of university councils and the voice of students and staff to force the changes," Guille said.

"If the NTEU were not an ALP affiliate, it would be operating outside the State under a government committed to the Smart State was reducing staff representation on university councils.

"The Queensland Minister is the driving force behind the Minister for reducing university democracy," he said.

"Staff and student representation on university councils... is fundamental to the very long established ethos of universities as communities of learning: it is the foundation of collegiality..."

"Staff urged university staff and students to personally lobby their colleagues, parliamentarians and President Peter Beattie, and call for a Federal investigation into the issue extending from the Senate issue paper from Minister Nelson, Building Better Foundations for Higher Education in Australia that requests..."

"The University of the Sunshine Coast has previously recommended to the Queensland Minister that it wanted an increase of..."

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