Trustee Com

munication

Protocols

BY DOUG ORR

A SIGNIFICANT governance leadership challenge for today's board chair and college president is tending to the diverse array of stakeholder groups that vie for attention. It is an unrelenting demand, characterized by an endless flow of communication, rumor, misunderstanding, and exaggeration, and compounded many times over by social media. As characterized by Dominican University of California President Mary Marcy, "Governing boards and presidents lead in an ecosystem more akin to elected office than a business environment. And like our political environment, this ecosystem is often greatly influenced, and sometimes entirely altered, as our communication channels have proliferated with unprecedented speed."

Perhaps elected officials are the only other leaders who experience anything close to such myriad university stakeholder groups: administrative vice presidents and deans, faculty, staff, students, parents, alumni, donors, media, public at large, government, regional accrediting agencies, the church (for many independent colleges), overarching system boards and administration (in the public sector), and, of course, other trustees.
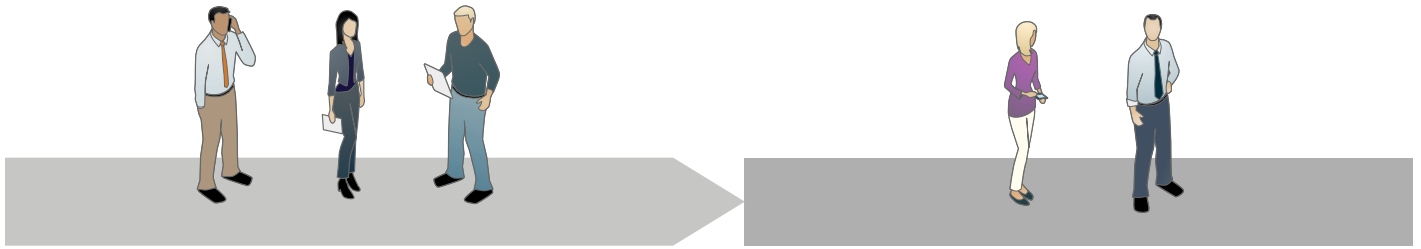
The Board Chair at the Communications Vortex

Board chairs are at the center of trying to navigate this complex web of communications. The combination of attending to as many as two or three dozen board members—all distinct individuals and from varied backgrounds—and the multiplicity of stakeholder groups at play can be a vexing assignment. His or her partnership with the president is significant on several levels but no more so than in the orchestration of the communication flow, and in establishing understood guidelines for board members. Much is at stake for the contemporary college presidency not only for the sake of effective governance but also for the well-being and sustainability of the presidency itself. Too many presidencies have been undermined, sometimes irrevocably, by a breakdown in communications involving one or more of the constituencies. It is likely a factor in the continued diminished length of presidencies, with the average tenure today of 6.5 years. Tom Flynn, president emeritus of Alvernia University, offers this perspective: "Among the most important expectations that presidents have for board chairs is to be an effective and reliable partner in communication. Not only is the chair the spokesperson for the board (unless otherwise delegated) but the chair must ensure that the president is kept well informed of any issues arising among trustees. And the presidents have a pivotal role in ensuring that that communication with and among trustees is timely, thorough, and transparent in style and tone of our communication. "

Overarching Guidelines

So, what should be appropriate considerations for the board chair in overseeing the communication traffic? In some ways, the chair is a figurative traffic cop. It is not an easy task and each campus has its own set of unique circumstances of custom and process. Amidst the pluralistic democracy that is academic governance in this nation's great variety of institutions, one size doesn't fit all. Nevertheless, there are overarching trusteeship guidelines the chair may provide as contacts from all directions come to trustees. Every stakeholder group, at one time or another, wants the ear of trustees, who occupy a perceived mythic status within the hierarchy of academic governance. In one sense, this gives trustees the opportunity to be "an ear to the ground" in a perpetual listening posture. Clearly not every specific circumstance can have its own set of rules, but the determination of what information merits forwarding to the chair or president can be a conundrum calling for a set of common-sense principles. Consequently, guideline examples may include: the "need to know" in reporting information to the chair and president; common courtesy in keeping the chair and president advised of conversations; and a steadfast respect for confidentiality.

As to the need to know, trustees are often in conversation with the variety of constituent groups. Sometimes the substance of the discussion will be simple socialization that requires no follow-up, but other times it could involve serious enough subject matter, although often rumor, that warrants reporting to the board chair, president, or both. And even though false, some serious rumors may call for clarifying action by the leadership. This is a judgment call based on a variety of possible contexts. Not surprisingly, many individuals approaching trustees have grievances or agendas. While it is off-putting to be mute to such overtures, a reasonable response is to ask, "Have you gone through channels?" Additionally, common courtesy underscores the need to

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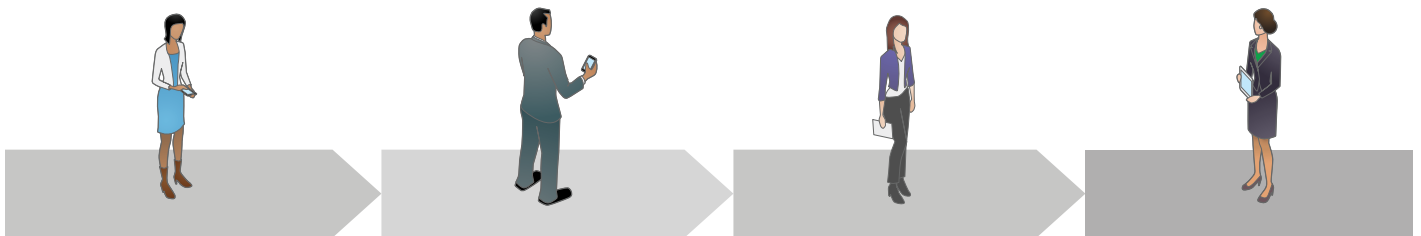
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ensure that even seemingly trivial information that could neverthe-less cause awkwardness or misunderstanding be reported. Plus, the chair and president deserve to be kept aware of stakeholder discussions that reach the level of substantive governance issues. Finally, maintaining confidential board and institutional information is an ethical thread that should prevail throughout the process.

Trustees may experience as many kinds of communications as there are categories of individuals and personal agendas. Consequently, effective communication protocols will no doubt encounter gray areas in application. The board chair might look to board meeting executive sessions or even retreat settings as a good opportunity to review communication guidelines but also work through examples that might present confusion or dilemma. This also reinforces a board culture of unfailing transparency. Rick Lutovsky, chair of the board of the University of North Carolina at Asheville, states: "I am constantly reminded of the diverse number of campus and community individuals who come in contact with board members, and particularly for an institution regularly in the public and media eye. It is fundamental to effective governance that trustees have guidelines in reporting what they hear.

Otherwise, inaccurate perceptions can take on a life of their own. The constant communication process is an ever-present fact of life for governing board operations that we should regularly review with our trustees."

The Stakeholder Groups

Each of the university stakeholder groups can present a distinctive set of circumstances as to communications with trustees. Vice presidents need to communicate regularly with the chair of his or her committee. But both individuals should apprise the board chair and president as to significant agenda or other items that entail a need to know as well as common courtesy. In some institutions, faculty, staff, or students have a seat on the board, which fosters regular reporting. At a minimum most boards afford these groups the opportunity to attend board committees for information sharing on a nonvoting basis. Or representatives from the faculty senate, student government, and staff organizations can be invited to provide periodic briefings to the full board. A well-received best practice with the Berea College Board of Trustees is to invite from time to time a faculty, staff, or student panel to meet with

the board and provide perspectives on timely issues about their particular experiences. Sometimes it can be organized around special themes. A diverse composition of panel members and the interchange among them allows for deeper trustee insights as to the campus life of those constituencies. Alumni boards and parent councils are examples of structured entities that can communicate to the trustee board through their leadership. It is not unusual for the alumni to have an ex-officio seat on the board of trustees, which ensures regular communication.

Public universities face an additional critical layer of stakeholder accountability. Terry MacTaggart, a former chancellor of the Minnesota State University System and the University of Maine System, notes: "Boards may be the ultimate authority on campus, but those elected officials who hold the purse strings often have the final vote. The university's employees are a politician's constituency whose voices will be heard. And not just elected officials but staffs, campaign contributors, neighbors, and friends." Navigating the communication complexities of this public network can be a full-time task unto itself, full of never-ending unpredictable challenges.

Finally, trustee-to-trustee communication particularly calls for chair guidance as to the variety of exchanges that take place among board members, especially outside the boardroom. Trustee socialization with one another is of course encouraged and is a part of setting and staging productive board meetings, which is fundamental to a healthy board culture. Board members getting to know one another better is an ongoing governance goal. And "sidewalk discussions" are to be expected and are normal. But the health of some boards has been poisoned by the existence of cliques having their own agendas. Here the board chair must monitor and firmly intervene as appropriate and direct such outside agendas to an honest and transparent conversation within the boardroom itself, in executive session if need be.

Board Culture and Trustee Communications

A healthy board culture is the foundation stone for effective board governance as well as success in implementing communication protocols. It should not be surprising that true dialogue is often missing from board deliberations. Academic board meetings historically have been characterized as report driven rather than issue driven agendas. Thankfully that has been changing for most academic boards although it is still a work in progress. However, there is a tendency for many board discussions to fall short of true dialogue as members make pronouncements rather than engage in the serious listening fundamental to substantive exchanges. A culture of deep listening is critical. A healthy board culture also entails a climate of trust, transparency, and a welcome invitation for disparate views whereby members are able to "disagree agreeably," and avoid the tendency for polite dysfunctionality. Consequently, effective board function and its supporting communication flow

does not happen by chance. There must be intentionality in setting such values beginning with new trustee recruitment, the trustee expectations statement, orientation, subsequent mentorship, and ongoing board and member self-assessment.

Creating a board that allows for free and honest communication can be messy at times. It is much easier for a board chair to preside over an old-school board structure and agenda that is predictable and redundant. Yet given the new normal of today's higher education environment, governing boards must be agile and nimble, avoiding the trap of group think and constraints to the healthy flow of creative ideas. Additionally, board leadership agility is vital in an age of surprise and controversy that can show up at the door uninvited at any time in the academic world. A proactive posture is critical as observed by Mary Pat Seurkamp, president emerita of the Notre Dame University of Maryland: "It is essential for boards and presidents to have clarity about who is authorized to speak on behalf of the board and the president. At the same time, it is important to ensure that all trustees are appropriately informed about controversial issues." Indeed, such is the ecosystem we live in today, requiring clear lines of communications that can be activated at a moment's notice.

Technology and Board Communications

Certainly, a benefit of the technology age is the opportunity it affords for more accessible and rapid communications. Many boards have established secure web portals through which regular communications from the board chair and president take place. Board agendas and the standard president's report can be transmitted electronically and has become the norm. Likewise, president and the occasional board chair communications to the campus community and constituencies beyond can utilize online technology. However, a parallel downside is the immense volume of incoming email, texts, and social media, which has to be sorted out as to priority. Key communications can easily get lost in the flood. A helpful board exercise is to have ongoing conversation as to best uses of electronic communication to determine "how much is too much," what of importance is missing, and the realistic balance between.

Meaningful communications, so elemental to human community, be it family, neighborhood, town, or organization, are the vehicles through which we live out our interconnected lives. Universities, colleges, and their governing boards are no exception and in many ways these interchanges are the lifeblood to institutional viability, but misunderstandings can be pervasive in the human equation. Establishing well-designed guideposts for the unending and ever-changing communication web throughout academia is a board leadership responsibility of the highest order. ⊞

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