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How to operate your nonprofit board

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Many small — and some very large — not-for-profit organizations couldn't keep their doors open without the financial support of key members of their community, especially their board members. But board members have an important role in any organization's success that goes far beyond financial support. They must be cultivated as active members of an organization's strategic vision and the plans to achieve it.

I've served on a variety of boards over the last 40 years, both corporate and not-for-profit. As president of three very different colleges — both public and private — I've also reported directly to boards and been responsible for managing board relations. What I've learned in higher education and in the corporate world can apply to large and small organizations.

The best boards are interested, engaged and involved, without devolving into micro-management. Organizations can only advance when strong relationships are in place between presidents and governing bodies. How do we ensure that those relationships are in place? By following these guidelines:

1. Develop a vision and a long-term plan to achieve it. It's critical that this plan also incorporate the competitive threats and opportunities that exist and include the metrics by which you will measure success.

2. Anchor board meetings to strategy. Plan joint discussions with administrators and trustees that include an ongoing assessment of how the institution is doing and the pace at which improvement is expected. This keeps everyone focused on strategic topics worthy of a board



and prevents micro-management, which can distract.

3. Engender board confidence in the organization's administrative leaders. Ideally, a president has full confidence in the administrative team. Work to foster relationships between the chairs of board committees and the administrators who oversee those functional areas within the organization.

4. Promote honest, two-way communication. Avoid "show and tell" by ensuring that all meetings include ample discussion and opportunities for feedback. Presidents and other senior administrators need to listen, ask open-ended questions and bring to the surface any disagreements. Don't let issues fester; get them treated as soon as possible. Most importantly, the chairs and presidents need to work together to define these issues and resolve them.

5. Educate the board members. An orientation for incoming trustees is a must — and that education should be ongoing. I push this at my institution because higher education is a difficult and complex environment and board members need to understand it as much as they need to understand the accelerating pace of change in my industry. They also need to learn the governance model of the organiza-

tion, as well as the culture. Too many board members come in with their own business experience and are hard-pressed to apply it to the organization they now serve as members of its board. The same can be said in any highly specialized organization or industry.

6. Educate the community about the board of trustees. The governing board has a unique role, and the larger community of employees — and in my case, students, faculty and alumni, too — should understand how it exercises its responsibilities.

The board relationship is key to an organization's success, including its fiscal well-being and the progress it can achieve. But we all know relationships can easily turn, especially when the parties are under the kinds of pressure today's administrators and boards experience. By taking time now to focus on this relationship and the tenets and tone for advancement, presidents and boards can firmly establish their organizations' path to success.

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