

So, You're the Board Chair

BY CATHY A. TROWER

CONGRATULATIONS! Now the work begins! Some board chairs are selected as part of a careful board leadership succession plan and may have served as vice chair or chair-elect. If that's the case, you're lucky, as you have at least some idea about what you've just stepped up to do. And, if that succession plan included careful consideration of the qualities, skill sets, and attributes needed in that role at your college or university today, and you're the best match, better still. Whatever the circumstances of your selection—you are now it!

Here are some tips—gathered from conversations with many board chairs and personal experience—to keep in mind.

First: Partner with the President

- Prior to your first meeting as chair, meet with the president and the prior chair to discuss the transition. How are you and your predecessor alike in terms of leadership style? Different? How will that matter to the president? Senior team? Board? Discuss what each of you most needs from the other and how to ensure success.
- Prior to each meeting, ask the president to articulate goals. What does the president need from the board at this meeting? What are some approaches to meeting those goals? Think themes rather than reports and design agendas around those.
- At the start of meetings, remind the board of what's happened since the last meeting and where things stand. Fore-shadow what's ahead on the agenda and how the board can add value.
- During meetings, have the president help you notice what's going on in the room. It can be challenging to facilitate a dialogue and keep track of the group dynamic so



sit side by side and pass a note or two as needed.

- Toward the end of important discussions and meetings, take stock and summarize, saying, "Here's what I heard. Did I get that right? Am I missing anything?"
- Ongoing: Be a coach not a manager and be receptive to feedback. Help the president see blindspots and biases. Be a team player; allow the president to point out your blindspots and biases. Discuss your relationship candidly—what's working well? What do you most appreciate about the other? What needs improvement? Ask what it's like having you as chair and what you can do better?

Second: Partner with your Trustee Colleagues

- Prior to your first meeting, meet with every trustee to hear about their experiences serving on the board. You may be "lobbied" by trustees on pet issues; be polite but not sucked in.
- You don't have to do everything; in fact, you can't, and you shouldn't. Working with the administration, cultivate other board leaders and enlist them appropriately for committees, task forces, ad hoc groups, and speaking opportunities.
- Recognize the talents that every trustee brings to the table and be inclusive in your work with them.

Third: Be the Chair that You Would Want if You Weren't the Chair

- Remember: It's not all about you. You are first among equals. You set the tone for board conduct. Take the job seriously, but don't go overboard. Be humble, not bossy.
- Stay calm; listen—really listen (don't just be thinking about the next thing you want to say). Facilitate the conversation; don't have "the answers." Your job is not to solve problems.
- Help create and ensure a board culture for effective deliberations and decision-making (not lead the board to the solutions you like).
- Seek feedback about your performance; don't assume you know.
- Recognize that you will sometimes be in the hot seat and will need to have a thick skin when various constituents don't like a decision the board has made.

In conclusion, don't expect perfection; you'll almost certainly make some missteps. Have fun; enjoy the position. The more confident and relaxed you are, the more assured the president, the senior leadership team, and fellow trustees will be. ■

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