

BOARD CHAIRS AND THEIR CHALLENGES

1. A CROWD AT THE MEETING

Two days before the June board meeting, the CEO contacts the board chair to alert her that there will be at least 50 people in the audience. It turns out that the agenda item on the closing of the child care center is attracting a great deal of attention. The Board discussed closing the center at the May meeting as part of overall budget reductions and the need to cut expensive programs, and was planning to take a final vote at the June meeting.

The board meeting arrives, and the room is packed with people from the community, child care center staff, and children. Many of the people are angry, and some are carrying signs. Thirty of them have signed up to talk during the public comment session of the agenda. *How should the chair best prepare for the meeting? What are effective ways to handle the meeting?*

2. HIRING AN ARCHITECT

The Hilltop College Board of Trustees is looking forward to taking action at their next meeting to approve a major contract for the design and construction of a new student services center. In accordance with board policy, the CEO and other key staff conducted a competitive request for proposal process, which included site visits and further interviews of the top three firms. The Board has been kept informed about the process and provided general feedback on the concept and budget limits.

One of the trustees has learned that two other trustees lobbied the CEO and board chair outside of the meetings to select one of the firms. She is upset because 1) the trustees are talking outside of the board meetings and 2) she supports a different firm, where her cousin is an architect. She had been careful not to create the perception of a conflict of interest in promoting the firm, but now feels like her propriety was for naught.

She decides to take matters into her own hands. She writes a letter to the newspaper, calls the state association, and contacts her state representative to report that the two members have violated ethics and possibly open meetings laws by lobbying for the firm.

What should the board chair do now?

3. REBUILDING TRUST

After 18 months of negotiations, the Central County College board of trustees was finally able to reach agreement with both the staff and faculty unions for three year contracts. The negotiations had been acrimonious; unions had attacked the board at public meetings and written letters to the editor attacking the administration. The faculty union had even held a vote of no confidence in the CEO and Board.

The negotiation process was even more difficult because, at one point in the process, it became clear that closed session information about the board's positions in negotiations was shared with the faculty union. The board chair and the CEO suspect that one of the board members was sharing confidential information with the union leaders, but were never able to prove it.

However, with the settlement of the contracts, all parties know that it is now time to rebuild trust and improve relations among board members and between the Board, CEO, and employee groups. *What should the Board Chair and CEO do now?*

4. ACCREDITATION THREAT

Suburbia Community College has had four presidents in the past eight years. One was fired by the Board after two years, one served as an interim for a year, one left after three years for another position, and the current one is in her second year. The campus culture is fractious: faculty leaders are quick to criticize, speak at board meetings, and contact board members directly.

Given the high rate of CEO turnover and the difficulties on campus, the Board is closely monitoring the performance of the current CEO, believing that they are helping her to succeed. Board members insist on reviewing all activities and do not hesitate to contact staff to intercede and solve problems.

Recently, the college went through the re-accreditation process. The visiting team identified the CEO turnover as a problem and expressed its concern about the ability of the college to provide quality education given the fractious culture. The team identified that the Board was contributing to the problem due to 1) the board's disregard for the CEO and her authority, 2) its practice of directing college activities, 3) faculty and staff working directly with board members, and 4) trustees who ignored their own board policies and code of ethics.

As a result of these and other related problems, the college received warning about their accreditation status.

What should the board chair do now?

5. LINE ITEM BUDGETING

It is the board's annual budget study session and the Valley View College Board of Trustees was facing difficult decisions. Reductions in state funding meant that cuts were necessary. The study session had started off well—the CEO had discussed the extensive budget development process, which included long-range revenue and expenditure projections, as well as contractual and other legal constraints. The Board discussed the policy priorities used to determine allocations to programs, salaries and benefits, and facility needs.

However, a couple of hours into the workshop and the discussion started to get specific. Trustee Smith started it by saying “All this philosophical discussion is fine, but it's meaningless. I say we need to review each line item in the budget and decide whether or not we support it. We need to make serious cuts. That's what we have been appointed to do.” Trustee Jones responded that if the board was going to do that, he wanted to review enrollment data to see where the Board could cut low-enrolled programs and positions. Trustee Robinson jumped in to say that in that case, she wanted to review all travel, conferences, and memberships. A motion was quickly made and seconded that the trustees be provided with a line item budget so that they could do the “real work” of determining the college's budget.

What should the board chair do now?

6. CHANGES ON THE BOARD

Over the years, the Board at Historical Community College has worked well as a team. The members followed good communication protocols and practices, which were readily accepted by new members as they came onto the board. Issues and potential controversies have been thoroughly discussed at study sessions; therefore, there was often little discussion at business meetings when they voted on issues. However, things have changed. Two new members were recently appointed to the Board who have different ways of operating, and both disagree with the communication protocols and current way of doing business on the board.

Eileen Well has a great deal of enthusiasm for her new role, is eager to contribute, and has lots of questions and ideas that she is bringing up at each board meeting. She has accepted invitations from faculty, staff, and student leaders to attend meetings and visit classrooms and events, and has encouraged all employees to contact her with their ideas and concerns.

John Shaker, the other new trustee, has stated that the board has been too complacent, there hasn't been enough public debate of issues, and that he would bring more oversight to the board meetings. He is asking for extensive detail and justification for all board items, including routine approval of warrants and personnel actions.

What should the Board Chair do now?