

# This Above All To Our Own Selves Be True

## The Importance of Assessing Board Performance

by Rebekah Burch Basinger

At every turn these days, seminary boards are being encouraged to make assessment of their own performance a high priority. In fact, there are those who go so far as to suggest that giving attention to the work of the board IS the most important work of the board. Yet when trustees decide to do a self-assessment, they very quickly discover there's no tried-and-true blueprint for how to go about the task. For many boards, the lack of clear models creates more frustration than they are able to handle. They throw up their hands in despair and continue with business as usual.

And that's too bad, because assessment almost always does a board a lot of good. By focusing on their own performance, trustees are reminded anew of the roles and responsibilities of the board. Also, regular evaluations provide benchmarks against which trustees can measure their progress in meeting stated plans and goals. And self-assessment usually serves to uncover areas of board activity that need attention or improvement. Even if not done completely "by the book," assessment helps make good boards even better, and good boards, in turn, contribute to enhanced institutional effectiveness. In truth, the mechanics of self-evaluation are not the most important aspect of the process. Indeed, how a board goes about assessing itself is far less important than, in the words of the Nike commercial, just doing it. For the most part, boards already have at hand everything they need to evaluate their own performance - and that's the combined wisdom of their own membership. All it takes to do the job is the will to do it, the patience to define what needs to be done, and the foresight to capitalize on teachable moments that occur in the life of every institution.

### All Aboard!

The first step toward self-assessment is to encourage a groundswell of support among trustees for the process. Dan Schipp, vice president for development at Saint Meinrad School of Theology (Ind.), tells how members of the Board of Overseers had talked a lot about issues of structure and board effectiveness before undertaking an assessment of their performance. "There was general agreement in the board that it's important to 'speak its mind.' We had across the

group recognition of the importance of board development."

And that's how it has to be. For a board to improve its performance, it takes the full participation of a majority of the members in an intentional program of evaluation and education.

As for who holds responsibility for getting the assessment ball rolling, it's a fact of board life that the job of advocating for self-assessment rests squarely on the shoulders of the board chair and members of the Committee on Trustees or similar group. The president should participate in, but not lead, board assessment activities.

Board members must be willing to cast a critical eye on themselves, and to ask hard questions about the value-added aspects of their work, both individually and as a group. And after asking questions, boards must be willing to act on what they learn. No one else can do this for a board - it is their job alone. Board self-assessment is one of the toughest things trustees have to do for a seminary.

Bonnie Graham, chair of the Board Development Committee at Saint Meinrad, states, "It's difficult to assess the board because it means assessing yourself, but we knew it was something we needed to do. In light of all that was going on with the institution at the time ( a decision had been made to close the undergraduate program and continue Saint Meinrad's as a seminary only), board members needed to figure out where we fit in. We recognized that unless we were willing to consider the possibility of change, we weren't going to be a working board, and that wasn't a future many of us were willing to accept," Graham says.

As a result of committing themselves to critical self-reflection, Saint Meinrad's Board of Overseers are moving into a future that is much more to their liking, and one where they know they are, as Graham reports, "focusing on the right issues." The Board has undertaken a provisional restructuring of its committees through the spring of 2000, organizing their work along program rather than administrative lines. The Overseers have discovered, as have many other boards, that self-assessment is the foundation upon which to build a strong board and a strong institution.

A word to the wise. Some presidents and board members are ambivalent or even negative about in-service education and board development programs. Advocates of self-assessment should be prepared to address the concerns of nay-sayers, and that includes spending time making the case for evaluation and board education. Striving for the best performance of a board is too important a goal to give up on, even in the face of initial opposition.

## With Map in Hand

Before a board can engage in meaningful self-assessment, trustees need to determine just where it is they are headed as a group. It's important to have a map in hand as the board sets out on a journey of self-discovery. Evaluation done as a freestanding action is almost always an exercise in futility, and it does neither the board nor the institution any lasting good. In contrast, as Graham and the other Overseers at Saint Meinrad have learned "if you start with a good assessment, everything else flows from there."

Trustees at Lancaster Theological Seminary (Penn.) also understand the importance of setting their sights on a desired end-point before embarking on self-assessment. It has taken several years and a lot of hard work to restore financial stability to the institution, and the future now looks bright for the school. President Peter Schmiechen notes that "people expect the goals of the seminary to be different - that Lancaster Theological is going to do something important." In response to heightened expectations on the campus, the board is taking a close look at its role in future developments of the seminary. As Gene Hannun, vice chair of the board, puts it, "We would hate to have someone say the board is holding back the growth of the school."

During an upcoming retreat, trustees will develop definitions of a great seminary, a great faculty, a great graduate, and a great board. Then, with the definitions in hand, they'll identify questions the board needs to answer for itself during the months ahead. Following the retreat, a survey instrument will be designed addressing specifically the issues LTS trustees have names as important to them and the seminary. Although the survey will probably include a scattering of questions drawn from "off the shelf" self-assessment instruments, most questions will be shaped around the expectations Lancaster's board have set for themselves. (A listing of self-assessment instruments and other resources is included at the end of the article.)

Another word to the wise. The National Center for Nonprofit Boards warns trustees to steer clear of any system that promises an evaluation of the board but does not require that the board do its preliminary, criteria-setting work first. An effective board relies upon a carefully crafted map to guide its work, and for the most part, it is a map of the board's own making.

## From Good Times to Better

A mistake that some boards and presidents make is to look to self-assessment as a way out of crisis. Unfortunately, if there's trouble outside the boardroom and if trustees themselves are in a state of high anxiety, it's not likely that board members will have the energy or patience for thoughtful self-reflection. Assessment can help make a good board better, but it can't work miracles in places where things are going seriously wrong.

## Field-Tested Hints for Would-Be Board Assessors

Drawing from Saint Meinrad's experience with board self-assessment, Dan Schipp, vice president for development and staff liaison to the board, offers a handful of helpful hints for getting started.

- Self-assessment is best done with the help of a comprehensive survey instrument that includes a mixture of good ideas drawn from wherever they can find and questions that are specific to the institution. We tried to make our survey personal to the institution, but we also included some of the things that are typically considered by any board. There's no need for a board to reinvent every wheel.
- It is helpful to have an outside facilitator guide the board through the self-assessment process. It's hard for an insider to participate fully in board discussions and also keep the group on track.
- Be prepared to act on the results of the assessment. Be prepared to make changes. Nothing is more discouraging to trustees than working through hard issues, and then continuing on with business as usual.
- Make evaluation a part of every board meeting. Provide opportunity for board education in the agenda and make time for trustees to discuss key issues of the school. Inviting feedback from board members at the end of the meeting can serve as an early alert system to concerns or lagging interest among trustees.

On the other hand, when things are going well, many boards think there's little need for self-assessment. The tendency is to let things continue as they are. After all, if it's not broke . . . More often than not, it takes a nudge from factors external to themselves for board members to decide to take a look at their own performance. Transitions in the life of the institution – a change in presidential leadership, a capital campaign, the opportunity for new programs – often serve to encourage trustees to undertake self-assessment as a means of helping lay the groundwork for moving the institution from an okay or good situation to one that's even better.

Such is the case for Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary in Fresno, California, where the board must lead the institution through a period of tremendous change as the bi-national denomination to which the seminary belongs is replaced with separate national structures (Canada and US). A three-year plan for transition provides a window of opportunity for the board to prepare itself and the institution for the challenges ahead. As a first-step in that direction, MBBS trustees are working through a self-assessment process based on the six competencies of effective governance identified by the research team of Richard Chait, Thomas Holland, and Barbara Taylor (see the resources list), beginning the discussion of board performance at their September 1999.

They started with a short survey asking for trustee evaluation of the board's proficiency with regard to each of the six areas of board effectiveness. Between the fall 1999 and spring 2000 board meetings, a working group will propose strategies for strengthening the board's performance in areas of identified weakness. Early in the summer of 2000, board members will be asked to reflect on how they have benefitted individually through the study process, and also to "grade" the board on its corporate handling of a difficult and potentially devastating situation for the seminary.

While the impetus for the board's attention to its own performance comes from outside the institution, MBBS board members and administrators alike consider the work ahead a welcome opportunity to address issues of trustee board education and leadership effectiveness. The board recognized a transition within the institution as an opportunity for growth and improvement. Trustees are determined that activities of the next twelve to fourteen months should result in both a stronger seminary and a better, wiser board of directors.

## Keeping It Simple

Over the years, some unfortunate misconceptions have grown up around board assessment. Chief among these "boardroom myths" is that assessment demands sophisticated survey instruments and equally daunting reports of the findings that depend upon the expertise of high-priced consultants to bring to completion. And it is true that assessment can cost a pretty penny and does sometimes involve sophisticated survey methods – but it doesn't have to. Simple actions, when part of a trustee-designed plan, can be just as effective in bringing about improved performance.

There are standard issues that are usually part of a board assessment exercise. These include questions about the board's composition, processes for identifying and recruiting prospective members, committee structures, meetings, relationships with key constituencies, and how overall performance might be strengthened. Pre-packaged survey instruments are a ready source of good questions addressing these routine issues, and it is usually a waste of time for a board to create their own questions on these subjects.

Beyond these basics, however, the issues a board chooses to address through the assessment process should be closely linked to the specific situation and challenges confronting the institution and the board in the immediate future. When it comes to naming the "value added" aspects of board work for the organization, it is necessary that someone be asked to prepare institution-specific questions. This might be a trustee, a member of the seminary staff, or an outside facilitator. The important thing is to make sure the assessment instrument addresses clearly and thoroughly issues the trustees have identified as most important to their own performance and future work.

Today's trustees want their time and abilities to be well used. They are eager to make real contributions to the future success of a cause about which they care deeply. It is important, then, that boards devote time and attention to their own performance. This is the surest way to build a strong, involved and confident board, and through that board, a stronger seminary.

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