TRUSTEE TALK WITH ACCT

January 2014 Issue

Answering your questions about issues affecting boards today

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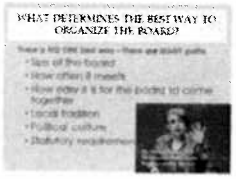

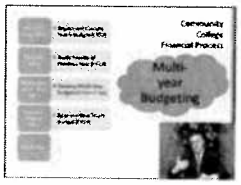

Webinar Registration: http://www.trustee-education.org/trustee-webinars

question:

My fellow trustees frequently claim that we are engaging in "micromanagement." What constitutes micromanagement?

answer:

We often hear that either a governing board or an individual trustee is "micromanaging" by being intrusive and getting involved in the operation of the institution. Sometimes this is true, but often it is caused by misunderstanding roles and responsibilities, not knowing how to ask the right questions, undue influence from constituents, or conflicting personal priorities.

The board of trustees is responsible for developing policies and carrying out its fiduciary responsibilities by ensuring that the college is in compliance with federal and state laws and regulations, providing leadership by defining "what" the policies and priorities are for the college, and ensuring the best educational opportunities for all students.

The president or chancellor of the college has authority over "how" the institution carries out board policy through operational decisions. However, there are a lot of grey areas when distinguishing between issues of governance, policy, or oversight versus management or administrative issues. This grey area can be even more complicated for elected trustees who have to be responsive to the voters and the communities they represent.

Examples of governing board micromanagement
Board oversight is carried out by asking questions such as "Does the budget we're considering support the strategic priorities of the college?", which falls clearly within the board's role. Asking "How many new computers has the college purchased?" or "Which computer model did you choose?" can be interpreted as micromanagement.

Examples of individual trustee(s) micromanagement
This can occur when trustees become involved in the day-to-day operations of the college and/or give directives to the administration without full board approval. Individual trustees are micromanaging when they move beyond the board's role and start seeing themselves as responsible for the management of the institution and viewing the administration and staff as their subordinates. It is important to remember that the governing board has only one employee: the President or Chancellor.

Your board can take a number of proactive steps to avoid micromanagement:

(1) Communicate Effectively and Regularly
Why is communication important? Because boards often

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Quick Links
Find more information on the Association of Community College Trustees, including national gatherings and events, effective governance, advocacy, executive search services, publications and resources: www.acct.org

Also visit the website of the Governance Institute for Student Success (GISS), a project designed to develop and implement a culture of evidence and accountability for student success at community and technical colleges: www.trusteesforstudentsuccess.org

Do YOU have a Question for us?
Email your question to: narcisa_polonio@acct.org, and it may be featured in our next Trustee Talk monthly newsletter!

Trustee Kedrich Jackson at Columbia Basin College drafted recommendations to his board on new trustee orientation using the December 2013 issue of Trustee Talk.

To share your story and/or reaction to the latest issue of Trustee Talk, email us here: narcisa_polonio@acct.org

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micromanage when they feel uninformed about how the college is being run. Regular dialogue allows the President or Chancellor to share how he or she is implementing the board's policies. This supports the board's effort to effectively monitor the college's progress. There is a strong correlation between a lack of communication/information and board micromanagement.

(2) Orient New Trustees
Why are new trustees often accused of micromanagement? New trustees can be eager to learn because they want to actively participate on the board. This desire to understand frequently leads to asking a lot of questions about concerns that fall beyond the purview of the board, which can be interpreted as micromanagement. New trustees should be informed of the board's role and attend an orientation to provide additional information and help guide their questioning.

(3) Manage Requests for Reports and Data
What is the right balance between requesting information needed for board oversight and avoiding micromanagement? The board should collectively determine which information requests are essential to performing its policy-making and oversight role. Every time the board requests information from the President or Chancellor, time and resources must be dedicated to gathering and reporting this data. While institutional monitoring is a crucial part of the board's role, excessive or duplicate requests to the administration by the board or individual trustees can unnecessarily distract the administration.

Discussing and agreeing as a board on what necessary information to request is part of the board's responsibilities. A good rule of thumb to consider is if it will take the administration more than 15 minutes to reply, prepare information, or give a report responding to a request, then the request needs to be approved by the whole board.

(4) Address "Lone Ranger Syndrome"
To prevent cases of "Lone Ranger Syndrome", the board chair should clarify that all requests for information or reports should come from the board as a whole. Distributing assignments can also address the "Lone Ranger Syndrome." The committee structure can be very helpful in this regard: having the trustee chair a board committee or a special assignment can reinforce the individual's contribution and redirect their energy towards working with and for the board.

***A Cautionary Note**
All trustees need to be aware that an accusation of micromanagement can be used as a tool to stop dialogue and discourage a board from asking the right questions and carrying out its due diligence.
It is vitally important for boards to know the difference between micromanagement and effectively carrying out their oversight responsibilities.

Look to the next issue of Trustee Quarterly for a more in depth look at micromanagement.

References:
Board Focus: Preventing Micromanagement-Creating High Performance Boards. Community College League of California. Volume 9, No. 1, Fall 2006."Defining Micromanagement"; "High Performing Boards Make & Monitor Policy"; "Why Micromanagement Occurs & What to Do About It" - Cindra Smith, Ed.D; "The Importance of Clear Delegation" - Wade Koeninger.

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