

Ten things the seminary president can do to build a more effective board

By G. DOUGLASS LEWIS

Doug Lewis, president emeritus of Wesley Seminary in Washington, DC, offers 10 specific moves the president can make that will build the board's capacity to govern with skill, with wisdom, and with enthusiasm. Whether new to the position or a seasoned veteran, the president can become a change agent by guiding the composition and the work of the board without jeopardizing its role as an independent governing body.



1 **Encourage the board to search for the chair with the same care that goes into the presidential search.** Ask how the chair is typically selected. Suggest that it consider and interview an array of board members who emerge as prospective chairs.

2 **Encourage the board to ask challenging questions:** What is the board's role in defining and realizing the school's mission? Who are its constituents, and who might they be in the future? What are the school's greatest internal resources? What are its greatest external threats? What new information, expertise, or relationships does it need to pursue in order to fulfill its mission? What would success look like five or 10 years from now? What one asset or characteristic can the school not afford to lose?

3 **Encourage expansion of the nominating committee's role to become a board development committee, and work actively with it.** Use the

committee not only to identify prospective board members but also to devise ways to continually educate and engage those who are already serving. An ongoing board development process also opens the door for the president to be recruiting new prospects at all times. Remember, the president has the greatest access to identify and build relationships with people who have the combined skill, wisdom, and enthusiasm for the school's mission that will make them effective board members. He or she is also in the best position to interpret the school—its resources and challenges as well as its aspirations—to prospective board members.

4 **Work with the board to engage in governance training.** Work with the board development committee to continually remind board members of the importance of good governance and equip them with the tools to exercise it. Shared reading assignments can offer a common vocabulary, and regular education sessions at board meetings provide the opportu-

nity to test and expand their skills in working together and with the school's other constituents to appropriately fulfill their roles.

5 Review the provisions in the bylaws pertaining to board composition, term limits, expectations of board members, and protocol for shared governance. Is the size of the board workable? What requirements are imposed by denominational judicatories? Are there reasonable term limits? Are they enforced? Is there a financial commitment expected of board members; if so, is it specified, appropriate, and clearly communicated? Are the respective roles of board, administration, and faculty clearly defined? Consider proposing and encouraging revisions to the bylaws to address these issues.

6 Establish a lay advisory committee. This committee can serve as the board's "farm team," a venue for engaging friends of the school and testing their capacity for board service. Such a committee, which can be larger than a board—40 members, for example—should meet a couple times a year. As they are invited to wrestle with some of the school's thornier challenges, certain individuals will likely emerge as particularly talented leaders who would make good board members. The advisory committee should not be used just as a cheerleading squad or fund-raising arm. Maintaining it as a strictly lay body offers the possibility of fresh and objective perspectives and can connect the seminary to the members' congregations.

7 Insist on an employment contract, at least for the first year, and ask for an annual evaluation. The president can help the board to develop the contract, which should address issues of compensation, evaluation, lines of authority, and primary responsibilities. It will help all parties to define their thoughts about the working relationship between the board and the president and will establish the presidential role as one that is affirmed by the board, supported by the board, and accountable to the board. The annual evaluation ensures that the board will continue to devote thoughtful consideration to goals and responsibilities for the chief executive officer.

8 Make the most of the honeymoon period. The first three years of the presidency offer a Kairos moment when the president can build leverage and momentum for the long term. Use that time to build relationships, promote board education, and introduce new strategic initiatives.

9 Use astute board members to help fill any gaps in your expertise. If financial management is new to you, lean on the finance committee and its chair to build your own capacity and to introduce stronger financial expertise to the board, either through education or through the identification of new board members. If you are facing complex real estate issues, spend time not only soliciting advice but also, in partnership with the board, becoming a student of the ins and outs of property asset management, development, and innovative transactions.

10 Use accrediting actions as catalysts to facilitate change and spur the board to action. Actions by the Board of Commissioners of the ATS Commission on Accrediting present opportunities to spur the board to needed action. Use the required report backs to direct attention to issues that require timely evaluation or change. One school, for instance, in responding to a required report in six months on the process for curriculum revision, launched a shared governance project that has developed new protocols for integrated planning and decision making and, in the process, improved relations among faculty, administration, and the board.

While a thorough board transformation process can take as long as 10 years to fully realize, incremental improvements along the way will keep the momentum going and build a culture of positive change. A president needs a long-term commitment and strategy to build an effective board.



G. Douglass Lewis offered this advice in a plenary at the ATS Presidential Intensive in San Antonio, Texas, in January 2015.