

Board/Staff Interface: Balancing Formality and Informality

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One of the first things new board members at many colleges and universities sense when interfacing with senior staff is a “culture of openness,” where trustees feel comfortable asking questions that they are curious about, and staff feel equally comfortable responding without equivocation or temporizing. The worthy outcome of a culture of openness is a comfort level and spirit of collaboration that makes the shared governance model at colleges and universities workable.

Since that culture is so powerful and unusual, it’s worth noting some rules of thumb to support it. Trustees are asked to be sensitive to the power of the role and sometimes the unintended consequences of an inquiry. Thus, asking one of the deans, “Are Hispanic students being attracted to the college in appropriate numbers and being successful here?” could fall on either side of a divide: appropriate if the question is, through informal conversation, to get a sense of how the college is doing in this diversity priority; inappropriate if the intent is to imply an expectation of producing data and reporting back to an individual trustee.

The common sense resolution where ambiguity exists is simply to share with the board president and college president any concerns one may have regarding what one considers matters of importance and ask that the matter be considered for a future committee and/or board agenda item, thus relying on the board and administration sorting process to prioritize agenda items and to support the college president’s role of assigning tasks to staff.

When it comes to independent schools and the relationship between board members and staff, the plot thickens, since often trustees have even deeper ties and more personal ones, especially when their own children are in the school and faculty feel comfortable at time and uncomfortable at other times conversing with trustees about matters large and small.

Independent school trustees are often close to and work with on various projects faculty and staff, and therefore feel comfortable in asking, “informally,” questions like this: “How IS the faculty morale?” or “How’s the head of school perceived by the faculty,” or some such open-ended and leading questions. Sounds innocent enough, right? Maybe the intent is innocent, but the asking violates several principles of good governance.

For independent schools the relationship of trustees with faculty and senior staff can be and often is very personal and intimate, given that (according to -Dick Chait, the world’s most renowned expert on independent schools and college/university governance) independent school trustees are “...sullied by daily commerce with the school.” By that observation he meant that independent school trustees, typically current or past parents or alumni very close to the school, are privy to the rumors and crises of the moment that are the nature of the highly emotional roller coaster of schools, and therefore these trustees are often confronted by messengers conveying some level of concern or even hysteria about “what just happened.” Similarly, because they are on campus, some faculty and staff see them as “confidantes” to whom they can complain about this or that administrative decision. And when those same faculty or staff may offer up opinions

like “The faculty morale is as low as I’ve ever seen it,” some trustees may assume that observation is more than a data point of one.

Under such circumstances, how does a men independent school trustee “balance formality and informality” with senior staff, faculty, or other employees with whom they have a relationship?

- By knowing that they have only one employee, the head of school, and that a trustee’s job is to support the head. (Unless of course there’s credible evidence of some misfeasance, malfeasance, or scurrilous behavior on the part of the head, in which case the institution’s “whistle-blower” procedures would go into effect.)
- By knowing that, when prompted with a complaint, to react by saying, “Since I’m not your supervisor, I’d recommend you find a way to engage your supervisor in a conversation about what you are feeling about this matter – it’s the only way it will be addressed, since it certainly it won’t be addressed by the board.”
- By knowing you shouldn’t go on a “fishing exhibition” with loaded questions of any kind.
- By knowing that instead, the way to support faculty and staff and to deepen the informal comfort levels is to engage them in comments about what you are seeing in their specific work or in student events at the school that deserve commendation.
- By knowing that the head, and decidedly NOT the board, evaluates the faculty and admin staff, informed by data and input from constituents, including board members, from periodic confidential customer (parent) satisfaction surveys, student evaluations of the program and their teachers, achievement of departmental goals, etc.
- By knowing that the board evaluates the head based on annual goal-setting regarding the strategic plan’s objectives for the year, the head’s leadership objectives for the year, and the head’s personal goals for the year, all derived from conversations between the head and a subset of the board responsible for head support and evaluation.
- By knowing that the board would have a similar process in place for goal-setting and evaluation of the board, on an annual basis.

When trustees understand that a parent’s problem or faculty member’s problem with a polity or person at the school is not their problem or the board’s problem to solve, the proper distance is maintained and lines of authority over daily operations preserved.