

Conducting a Presidential Evaluation Can Benefit the Board, the CEO and the College

By Narcisa Polonio
ACCT Vice President for Board Leadership Services

Conducting a board retreat is a valuable way to facilitate the president's evaluation.

One trustee suggested that boards should move away from evaluation to "value-action." That approach would focus on the positive, but also identify areas that require greater attention by the CEO and the board.

One of the outcomes of the presidential assessment is to strengthen the relationship between the CEO and the board. It sets the stage for objective consideration of strengths and weaknesses, recognizing superior performance and challenges the CEO to constantly strive for improvement. It should also serve as an example of the board and president's commitment to accountability at all levels of the institution.

The assessment should never be about "getting the president." Dedicating time to design a process and to implement an effective evaluation is a prudent investment benefiting the president, the board and thus the college community. ACCT encourages boards to consider planning a retreat dedicated to the presidential evaluation and board self-assessment, and, if appropriate, to bring in an experienced facilitator to guide the discussion.

Why do many boards find it difficult to conduct the president's evaluation?

The relations of the board and the president is not just a typical supervisor-subordinate relationship.

We are all used to the one-on-one evaluation where a supervisor and subordinate meet to discuss performance. The relationship of the president and board is different from any other relationship within the institution. The president works for and



reports to the full board—not to just one board member.

While this may be an obvious distinction, it adds a level of complexity. Board members are not on campus every day to observe every detail of the president's performance. The president is probably much more knowledgeable about all the requirements and pressures of the position than individual trustees. The president and board are dependent on each other. Sometimes the board will lead, but often it is the president who guides and leads the board. Adding to this complexity are the diverse opinions, experiences and points of view represented on the board.

Some boards find it difficult to take on this responsibility. Very often the reluctance has to do with emotions and experiences that many individuals connect to evaluation. It can be perceived as confrontational

and negative; some even believe it is inappropriate to evaluate the president.

Some trustees don't have a lot of experience in this area and are just not sure what is appropriate in academia. Others find it embarrassing and confusing; still others find it difficult to agree with other members of the board. Many board members are aware of the dangers in conducting an assessment, and others choose to simply avoid or delegate the responsibility to the chair or a smaller group of interested trustees.

What do boards frequently want to aid their evaluations?

Many board members who contact ACCT are looking for a ready-made instrument that they can share with the rest of the board and get the evaluation process out of the way. We suggest to them that the

role of the president is too critical to the well-being of the institution to be handled in a routine way.

Assessing the CEO is one of the key responsibilities of the board. It is imperative that boards, with the assistance and cooperation of the president, dedicate the time necessary for a careful analysis. A commitment to an appropriate evaluation design and process is a valuable investment of time. Experience shows that it will take a couple of years of enduring the process and making adjustments for the board and president to be comfortable with a design and process that meets their needs.

What do presidents want?

Most presidents reach out to ACCT looking for expert advice on how to best assist their board. We find that many feel uncomfortable about having to provide guidance to the board, wanting to make sure they seek information on “what has worked best in other colleges” and to provide alternative approaches and instruments to their board. Most want to be involved, but do not want to be perceived as trying to manipulate the board. Many are eager to obtain feedback from their board and are very supportive of the idea of participating in an annual assessment process.

What has ACCT learned?

When it comes to handling presidential evaluations, boards fall into the following categories:

- **Formal** – The board follows a well-designed process with clear timelines and expectations. It includes opportunities for discussion, provides written feedback to the president, and establishes the goals, priorities and timeframe for the

continued on page 42

A Sample Evaluation and Board Self-Assessment Process

- > Assess the most recent performance as a mechanism for constructive consideration of strengths and weaknesses.
- > Recognize superior performance and the need for constant improvement.
- > Enhance the board/CEO relationship and the unique leadership partnership.
- > Set standards and heightened morale on campus by setting an example.

Preliminary Work

President prepares self-assessment report based on goals and priorities previously established with the board

1. Annual goals/objectives and strategic initiatives established jointly by the president and board.
2. State of the college—status report of the college on key indicators such as enrollment, fundraising, overall functioning and stability of the institution, status of strategic plans, etc.
3. Trustees complete survey form on president's performance.
 - a. Sample list of performance review criteria:
 - i. Leadership on campus and in the community
 - ii. Communication with the board
 - iii. Representation of the district
 - iv. Administrative and management skills
 - v. Fiscal management
 - vi. Personal attributes including trust and integrity
4. Self-evaluation form on board's performance (rate both board and individual performance).
5. Prepare summary of both trustee surveys.

Retreat/Workshop

- President to present both self-evaluation and state of the college and participate in questions and answers with the board.
- Distribute and discuss the summary findings from the completed surveys on the president's performance and board's self-evaluation.
- Facilitate discussion on accomplishments and items needing further attention by the president, the board and individual trustees.
- Set goals and priorities and the timeframe for the next evaluation and self-assessment process and provide a letter summarizing assessment to the president.

BOARD SERVICES *(continued from page 41)*

next review. All the board members and the president are comfortable with the process.

- **Informal** – The board and the president meet, the president presents information to the board, and an informal discussion takes place.
- **Avoid it** – The board is busy and puts off the evaluation for a year or two.
- **Don't do it** – The board has no formal evaluation process and historically has not conducted presidential evaluations.
- **Adopt an instrument or process from another college** – The board follows a procedure developed elsewhere and follows the required steps.
- **Ask the president** – The board asks the president to conduct research on how other colleges carry out the evaluation and to suggest a process. The president takes the leadership role in designing, implementing and guiding the discussion.

Why is an effective evaluation a prudent investment?

Where the president and board have taken the challenge to design and

implement an effective assessment, the rewards include:

- Enhanced knowledge of the institution by the board and greater understanding of the complexity of the presidency.
- A commitment to nurture and support the president.
- A commitment to hold on to a good leader.
- Greater clarity in goals and priorities.
- A greater focus on expectations and outcomes.
- Greater respect and improved communications.
- Better group and planning skills by the board.
- A sense of ownership and pride in the assessment process.
- An opportunity to reflect and provide important guidance to the president.
- Greater trust between the board and president.

We recommend that the board take on the tasks of reviewing their current evaluation process and consider holding a retreat that would allow them time to

work with their president to understand, reflect and appreciate their roles


The retreat should be conducted in a professional manner, based on mutual consensus and a commitment to strengthening leadership at the college.

To get started, the board and president may want to seek advice from experienced facilitators who can assist with all of the components, including how to maintain confidentiality and guide the discussion. The external facilitator can assist the board by interviewing the president and trustees and incorporating their ideas and suggestions into a customized instrument. The consultant can also analyze data, facilitate a constructive discussion and prepare next steps for the board.

We always recommend combining the president's evaluation with board self-assessment. Many boards and presidents have worked well together to handle the assessment responsibility. The association has learned a lot from these boards and we want to make sure we continue to share what works well.



Narcisa Polonio can be reached at 202-775-4667, ext. 126, cell phone 202-276-1983, or email: npolonio@acct.org.



THEY DESERVE
MORE THAN JUST
A GOLD WATCH.

Honor Outstanding and Retiring Trustees with an ACCT Lifetime Membership

The Lifetime Membership is a prime opportunity for community, junior, and technical colleges to honor outstanding and retiring board members and to pay special tribute to their many contributions to your institution.

Lifetime Membership fees are invested in the Association of Community College Trustees Trust Fund and managed by a special Trust Fund Board.

Lifetime Membership Fee: \$1,000

Lifetime Members receive:

- Complimentary registration to all meetings after retiring from the board
- ACCT's Trustee Quarterly
- Recognition by your peers at ACCT meetings

FOR APPLICATIONS OR ASSISTANCE, PLEASE CONTACT:

Lila Farmer
■ 202-775-4667
■ lfarmer@acct.org
■ www.acct.org