

The importance of setting proper boundaries with the board (essay)

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When Not to Compromise

It may seem natural for a president to try to appease a board, but establishing clear roles and boundaries is vitally important, write Barbara McFadden Allen, Ruth Watkins and Robin Kaler.

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Consider this hypothetical but all too common situation: President Bryan Williams finds himself in an untenable position. He arrived at his new institution about six weeks ago, with bold aspirations to lead a good university on a trajectory toward excellence. His own career path was impressive, and the new leadership role suited him well. He had a noteworthy record as a scientist, followed by successful service as a chair and then dean of a large, influential college. The opportunity to move to a presidency at his alma mater was a career-capping aim. Williams eagerly embraced this leadership role.

After about a month in his new role, several members of the institution's Board of Regents individually approached Williams about a member of his leadership team, calling for the removal of Chief Business Officer Eileen Rosso. Those regents expressed a range of concerns, asserting, for example, that Rosso had not previously supported some of their ideas for cutting academic programs and had resisted their input to reduce or eliminate specific activities.

From Williams's perspective, Rosso had been the model colleague, conveying crucial financial details, working long hours alongside him through the leadership transition and recommending thoughtful, strategic approaches to generate and use resources. When the president shared his perspective, a cluster began to form among the regents, with the group now insisting -- to the point of a thinly disguised ultimatum -- that Williams remove Rosso from her position immediately.

Williams could see nothing of concern in Rosso's work -- quite the contrary -- and was deeply troubled by the regents' interference in matters that were, without question, fully within the scope of the president's responsibility. Yet he did not wish to have a public confrontation with his board, particularly so early in his tenure when neither his presence as the institution's leader nor his personal relationships were firmly established.

Williams felt unsure of his own footing. As he wrestled with the increasing pressure from the regents and his own uncertainty as a new leader, he tried to think about the best interest of the institution. It would not be served by a rift between the Board of Regents and the new president. It also would not be served by a board operating beyond its purview.

Clear Roles and Boundaries

Williams faces a significant leadership dilemma. Can he succeed in his new role?

Yes, if he resists the impulse to compromise. It may seem natural to seek a middle road to appease the board, perhaps creating a new position above Rosso, removing her from direct view of the regents and redirecting many of her duties. The primary challenge with that solution, however, is the precedent it establishes, in addition to unnecessary use of resources for a second position.

Williams needs to be clear about his responsibilities and authority from the outset. The first step in any direction away from this foundation will probably seem relatively benign, but it can initiate a pattern of role confusion that will yield significant concerns for the institution over the long term. Despite efforts to communicate about his decisions and actions, it's possible that Williams will alienate some regents. Whatever comes of that will be better than the outcome of doing the wrong thing based on a board that's stepped beyond its responsibilities.

Once Williams determines that he needs to address this as a board-management issue, he will need to gather information on the limits of board authority, as articulated in the governing documents, and consult the board chair regarding the behavior of the board members who pressured him. His tactics should move from rebuffing the board on a personnel issue that is clearly within his purview to working with the board to establish a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities.

However, Williams can't succeed as president if he compromises or simply follows the board's directive. It's typically not the last error that cripples a leader. More often, it's the first concession that begins to erode authority. Establishing clear roles and boundaries for the board is vitally important. Williams must resist the impulse to avoid conflict this early in his tenure and diplomatically and tactfully deal with this confusion. Capitulation at this point very likely will lead to board encroachment into other areas of responsibility that are clearly within the scope of the president's authority. That will result in an imbalance that will be harder to correct each time it is allowed.

Further, Williams's integrity is his most powerful leadership tool, but if he allows the regents to make him sacrifice a good colleague -- or to make any decision that is counter to his principles and that clearly violates the lines of authority within the institution -- he will find it increasingly difficult to stand his ground when regents, donors, legislators or others insert themselves inappropriately into his area of authority. His understandable desire to avoid conflict with a powerful board will erode the respect and support of the faculty, and the eventual result could be disastrous for his career and damaging to the university.

In a nutshell: a presidency is rarely characterized by a single heroic act of genius. Rather, it is a series of small but important actions building one upon the other over time. Tact, diplomacy and compromise are essential -- as is an understanding of clear boundaries and the ability to maneuver conflict. Keeping an eye on the long-term effects of even small deviations from personal and institutional values will help provide balance and perspective. Williams has the opportunity to act in a way that aligns with his values and establishes clear roles and responsibilities with his regents. He faces a defining moment as a leader.

Bio

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