

Eight Pet Peeves of Adventist College and University Board Members

Serving on a board represents a form of stewardship.

My first election to a college board of trustees came at my own alma mater when I was 24 years old, at a time when constituencies attempted to ensure that all age, gender, and ethnic groups were represented. With great trepidation, I stood up to make my first speech—only to have another board member get up immediately and say, “New board members should shut up for the first three years!” Not only was I shocked to hear this kind of language from a college trustee, but I was also hurt not to be taken more seriously. Older board members comforted me by suggesting that the man talked that way to everyone, and that I should not give up.

In spite of that modest beginning, I am today an advisor to the 15 college and university boards of trustees throughout the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists because of my position as vice-president of education for the division. This means that I attend each of these boards at least once annually.

I have also conducted training sessions for eight college boards, supervised exhaustive self-studies for three boards, and privately discussed the joys and frustrations of board service with a wide cross-section of board members, including laypersons and

church employees. I recall one very wealthy board member asking me in a small subcommittee focused on board improvement, “What does the church want from me as a board member? Is it just my money?”

Serving on a board represents a form of stewardship. While I and other church employees who serve on boards are paid for that service, many lay board members give up several days of personal time and income each year to attend board meetings. When I

see self-employed physicians, lawyers, businesspeople, insurance salespersons, and other professionals serving on boards, I marvel at the number of patients they could have seen, the hours they could have billed, the commissions they might have earned, or the vacation days they gave up. At no cost to the church, they are providing valuable service. They recognize the important biblical principle found in Proverbs 11:14: “Where no counsel is, the people fall: but in the multitude of counselors there is safety” (KJV). This service represents one of the greatest gifts of church members to our schools—the stewardship of boardsmanship.

Although most board members love to serve their church, I have observed eight common pet peeves about how boards currently conduct their business. By addressing possible solutions (which are drawn from my subjective observations and reading of professional literature on boardsmanship rather than any scientific

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research on Adventist trustees), we can make our colleges and universities even more effective. It may appear that by focusing on pet peeves, we give the impression that all of our boards are ineffective, but that is not the case. Most just need minor fine tuning.

Peeve No. 1: What is my job description as a board member?

Most board members get elected either because of a church position they hold or because they have very successful careers. We assume that this collection or “huddle” of highly motivated “quarterbacks” knows why they serve on boards. Instead, many wonder. As one board authority wrote, “many boards of trustees constitute a collection of ‘successful’ individuals who do not perform well as a group. The parts sum to less than the whole.”¹

Solutions:

All new board members should be given an intensive orientation by the board chair or designee. The college president should also provide published bulletins, catalogues, a constitution and bylaws, and a campus tour as a frame of reference. Some boards use a

Board members at Southwestern Adventist University in Keene, Texas, prepare to march in the Spring 1999 graduation ceremonies.

“buddy” system where experienced board members work with new members through the first year of service. Even experienced board members should review their job description at the beginning of a new term.

Some boards appoint a trustee development committee to oversee this important process. Other boards have detailed manuals that provide written procedures. Of course, actually having a job description for the board’s role is essential to this process. The following responsibilities gathered through my experience with many boards may be a helpful beginning point:

1. To appoint, support, and assess the performance of the college president.
2. To clarify the mission of the school, making sure the philosophy and goals of the Seventh-day Adventist Church are being met.
3. To approve long-range plans for the college or university.

4. To approve the institution’s educational program.

5. To ensure the well-being of faculty, students, and staff.

6. To ensure adequate financial resources for the school.

7. To hold the college or university in trust for the church.

8. To interpret the campus to the community.

9. To interpret the needs of society to the campus.

10. To serve as a court of appeals.

11. To assess their own performance.²

Peeve No. 2: Why do church officials seem to dominate the board?

Almost all boards strive to have at least one-half of the membership made up of laypersons in order to balance the *ex officio* church employees who serve. The union conference president or a General Conference general vice-president almost always chairs the board,

with strong input from other church executive officers such as treasurers, executive secretaries, or conference presidents. In some cases, church officials serve on multiple boards, which leads to questions about conflict of interest and support. A feeling exists on some boards that small committees dominated by church officials in reality make all the major decisions in pre-meetings and that it is a waste of time to come to board meetings, where the board will only “rubber stamp” their decisions.

Solutions:

The local union or General Conference subsidizes each college or university with millions of dollars every year. Having boards led by the leaders of the sponsoring organization provides a crucial link that keeps the schools connected to the church. Generally, the people who chair college and university boards have strong skills in this area because much of their professional lives involves such responsibilities. Having been elected to their positions, they represent both church officials and the broader constituency.

Church officials who serve on multiple boards need to give special attention to making certain that their fellow board members and constituency see them as strongly supporting all institutions on whose boards they serve. They can do this through regular attendance and participation at all board meetings, committees, and special functions. They must be seen as advocates and not casual attendees of just one more board meeting in their already crowded schedules.

The board should consider electing a lay vice-chair who can share responsibilities with the board chair (who is always a church official). All committees should have strong lay participation and should be chaired by lay board members as often as possible. In board

discussions, the chair should not assume that all board members have been privy to detailed behind-the-scenes discussions of crucial issues but should provide a full briefing to avoid the impression that the board simply serves as a “rubber stamp.” The board chair and college or university president should frequently consult privately with lay board members on key issues in order to get their valuable input.

Peeve No. 3: Beyond making a financial contribution, what is expected of me?

Some boards give the impression that all a board member has to do is to attend two or three all-day meetings each year and make a financial contribution to the school. Serving on the board is thus seen as more of an honorary position or a way to express appreciation to venerable church members.

Solutions:

All board members should make a

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major annual financial contribution to the college or university on whose board they serve. The first question asked by foundations when they receive grant applications is: “How many of your board members contributed last

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Board members of Loma Linda University, Loma Linda, California.

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year?” If the answer is less than 100 percent, the chances of getting the grant are greatly reduced. Board members should also help the college president and development officer identify and visit people who may be interested in making a donation. However, being a board member should involve much more than fund-raising!

The board should be organized so that each member takes on one major assignment in addition to regular attendance and financial contributions. Every board member should serve on at least one committee. Some trustees may want to help the college recruit students in their region. Others may help provide or identify potential internships. When the college takes touring groups to their area, certain board members may be responsible for organizing housing, food, and other needs.

Since the board represents the constituency, this requires two-way communication. Board members should regularly sound out constituency members for feedback that they can share with the college administration on a confidential basis. In addition, they should meet with the faculty and students in appropriate settings arranged for by the

college administration in order to get further feedback on how well the school is performing. While board members should not meddle in campus affairs, engaging in constructive dialogue can be very helpful. They can also share information with their constituency, thereby helping to “sell” and interpret the college’s mission.

Informed, objective board members help ensure accountability. One of their special duties is to make certain that the unique goals and values of a Seventh-day Adventist Christian school are being fulfilled for the constituency.

Peeve No. 4: Why is so much time wasted on formal reports and inconsequential issues in board meetings, leaving little time to discuss the really crucial issues?

A typical board meeting often involves long worships and administrative reports, with very little time to focus on the most crucial agenda items. By the time these reports are finished, busy members are already fingering their airline tickets home, and the board has little time left before its scheduled adjournment to meaningfully discuss issues of long-range concern.

Solutions:

The worship period can be a crucial time for establishing a spiritual tone for the board meeting and a way for the college to introduce faculty and staff members to the board. The importance of worship and prayer time should not be minimized, but having board members pray in groups of two or three, which is often more personal and meaningful, can reduce the demands on the total time scheduled for the meeting. The board chair can use the remaining time efficiently by reducing the length of administrative reports. The president or vice-president can send regular, informal E-mail reports to board members, with a more formal report submitted two weeks before scheduled board meetings. When board members have most of the information in advance, oral reports can be completed in a few minutes.

To make the board operate more efficiently, its members should be orga-

nized into committees, with each member serving on at least one committee. Some of the more important committees include executive, finance, academic standards, personnel, development, student relations, spiritual growth, strategic planning, investment, and board development. In some cases, several of these groups may be combined for greater efficiency. If board members cannot meet regularly with their assigned committee, they should seriously consider resigning from the board. The actual board meeting involves recommendations brought from these committees, with strong input from the institutional officer responsible for that area, which requires regular participation by each member of the committee. This structure provides each board member with the opportunity to have in-depth knowledge and input about at least one aspect of the college or university.

When the agenda is long and filled with many complex issues, the board chair may want to ask at the beginning of the meeting for help in setting priorities for the agenda. This will help ensure that issues of major importance are considered early in the meeting. Some boards may want to consider moving the administrative reports to the end of the agenda.

Peeve No. 5: Why do we spend more time on crisis management than in long-range strategic planning?

Adventist college and university boards frequently spend time on crisis management issues such as financial challenges, enrollment declines, or sensitive personnel issues. Busy board members wonder if these issues could be minimized by spending more time on strategic planning, physical master planning, long-range issues, and visioning.

Solutions:

Every board meeting should spend a significant amount of time on the college’s strategic plan. Administrative reports should center around the campus vision, which is encapsulated in a de-

tailed strategic master plan approved with input from the board. The strategic plan should include target dates for accomplishing the goals, with regular reports provided to the board about the

school's progress. If goals have not been accomplished, the reasons should be given to the board so the school can be challenged to further effort, or the goals revised to make them more realistic.

Boards should be more concerned with "big picture" agenda items than details better left to administration or board committees. The president is the person best qualified to establish and follow through on this approach. He or she should make sure that the goals and methods of implementation are regularly evaluated and updated. Whether the visioning and revision of goals takes place to satisfy the requirements of an accreditation commission or for some other reason, the board needs to see this area as central to the continued success of the school.

TRUSTEE: HELP OR HINDRANCE?

Trustees are a help when:

1. They see their job as a difficult and responsible task.
2. They budget their time and plan ahead to attend board meetings as well as specially called meetings of the subcommittees and the executive committee.
3. They will accept specific responsibilities in either committee or general work.
4. They make an earnest effort to be objective in evaluating the work, personnel, program, and policies of their institution.
5. They are willing to give serious study to the fiscal, academic, administrative, and community programs of their college or university.
6. They understand the distinction between making policy and administering policy.
7. They respect the work and the authority of the board as a whole.
8. They commit themselves to resisting pressure from groups and individuals, either within or outside the institution, who exert religious or political force that is not in the best interest of the school.
9. They are willing to act, think, and work as individuals rather than as representatives of any special group.
10. They are thoroughly committed to the ideals and purposes for which the institution was founded.

Trustees are a hindrance when:

1. They accept trusteeship as an honor rather than as a hard task and duty.
2. They agree to undertake assignments because, although they feel too busy to accept, they really cannot think of any good way to refuse.
3. They are sincerely interested and would like to do a good job, but do not plan far enough ahead in their schedules to be able to attend meetings.
4. They accept the job with an "axe to grind": theological, denominational, administrative, or financial.
5. They do not understand and are unwilling to learn the purpose, problems, and broad plan of development for the institution.
6. They fail to understand that the main function of the board is legislative, establishing policies that administration carries out.
7. They fail to understand that the authority of the board rests in the board as a whole, not in any individual trustee.
8. They yield to pressure groups, either within or outside the school.
9. They fail to understand that they must not act as representatives, emissaries, delegates, or messengers, but as individuals according to their understanding, consciences, and integrity.
10. They fail to understand that a Christian college is not "just another college," but an institution with a special mission to be carried out in the name and spirit of Christ.

While written for college trustees, these guidelines apply to board members of Adventist K-12 schools as well. Based on Ben C. Fisher, A Manual for College Trustees (Raleigh, N.C.: The Council on Christian Education, Baptist State Convention, 1965), pp. 15, 16.

Peeve No. 6: Can a large board, many of whose many members serve multiple terms, function effectively?

The average size of college/university boards in both the Seventh-day Adventist Church and among four-year independent colleges in the United States is 33 members.³ Most management authorities in the business world recommend a board about one-third this size. Board members often feel as if they are attending a convention, especially when all the invitees show up. With a large board, members can miss the meeting and not be noticed; while on a smaller board, everyone feels a greater need to be present.

Solutions:

A major study on these questions was conducted among 100 trustees on 22 independent college campuses. The surprise conclusion reached from the research was as follows:

"[T]he information that we . . . [gathered] on structure revealed no systematic patterns of association between board effectiveness and factors such as the board's size, the number and duration of board meetings, and whether there were limits on a trustee's length of service. These data safely allowed only one generalization: large boards wished they were smaller and smaller boards wished they were larger. One board's problem, it seemed, was another board's solution."⁴

Large boards function most effectively when each member serves on at least one committee. Because of the larger membership, meeting times may

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need to be longer to allow for greater discussion. However, one disadvantage of a longer meeting is that members sometimes meddle in management areas inappropriate for board discussion.

One reason Adventist college boards get so large is the large number of *ex officio* church officials who serve. If the goal is to have a board with at least one-half lay members, the size of most boards automatically exceeds 30 or more members. One way to reduce the number of *ex officio* members is to make some of them official advisors with voice but no vote.⁵ They can be placed on committees and treated as full board members in executive session, but they are not allowed to make motions or vote. This may not be a popular option for members who have served on the board for a long time, but the chair can tactfully explain the reason for the change.

A large board also requires careful selection of new members by the constituency. Careful thought should be given to possible new board members by a board development committee and résumés should be provided to the nominating committee before any selection is made.

Peeve No. 7: Why don't I get more help in being a better board member?

Boards typically become so agenda-driven that little time exists for profes-

sional board development. And unfortunately, not all board chairs recognize the need for having every new board member brought up to speed, and for long-time members to polish their skills.

Solutions:

An annual or biannual board retreat is the most crucial ingredient for the professional development of boards. Typically, such meetings pay huge dividends, since board members can spend more relaxed time for the spiritual, social, and professional development that time pressures do not permit during regular board meetings. Strong interpersonal relationships built at retreat time enable the "ties that bind" a board together to remain strong even when major disagreements occur. Long-range academic and spiritual issues can be addressed in a more private retreat setting where board members pray, sing, worship, play, and laugh together. Inviting spouses to these retreats allows them to witness and participate on a firsthand basis in the importance of board work.

The institution should also buy an institutional membership in the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB), which provides each member with a copy of *Trusteeship*, the finest journal for board members, and some other materials. Board members can also attend AGB seminars for further training. Board members would do well to subscribe to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, the best regular newsletter about higher education trends. They should also read THE JOURNAL OF ADVENTIST EDUCATION in order to follow trends in Adventist education.

Peeve No. 8: Why is evaluation of the president and board done so infrequently?

Very few boards conduct regular evaluations of the president and his or her administrative team. And even fewer evaluate themselves regularly.

Solutions:

Assign the responsibility of conducting evaluations to a board development committee that is instructed to focus on areas of needed improvement. If col-

leges and universities are required to evaluate students and faculty members, the board needs to set the tone by being serious about evaluating themselves and the administration.

Some boards use a short evaluation form after each meeting to get a quick view of how they are doing. Others use a lengthy survey instrument, which becomes the basis for professional development at a board retreat. Evaluations of the president should be done regularly rather than just at election time.

Conclusion

Implementing some of the above-listed solutions to pet peeves of board members will enable boards to more effectively become better stewards of the colleges/universities we have been given in trust by the Lord. ✍

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REFERENCES

1. Richard P. Chait, Thomas P. Holland, and Barbara E. Taylor, *The Effective Board of Trustees* (Phoenix, Ariz: The Oryx Press for the American Council on Education, 1993).
2. From *Perspectives on Trusteeship. Board Responsibilities in Private College and Universities* (Washington, D.C.: Association of Governing Board of Universities and Colleges, 1991) with the exception of "b" and "g," which were modified in order to take into account the special purposes of Adventist college boards.
3. Holly Madsen, "Composition of Governing Boards of Independent Colleges and Universities, 1997," AGB Occasional Paper No. 36 (Washington, D.C.: Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, 1998), p. 5.
4. Chait, et al., p. 4.
5. By tradition, I am not a voting member of any of the college or university boards in the North American Division except for Griggs University/Home Study International. In most of the board meetings I attend, I have an assigned place at the board table with a nameplate. I receive all board materials as if I am a full board member. I am invited to all official functions of most boards and even receive the traditional non-monetary Christmas gift given to board members. This approach has never made me feel like a second-class citizen. I would rather have an extra lay delegate on a board than to take up a position as a voting member.