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Ten Mandates for Today's

Education Board Chair

Today's board chairs are tested more than ever. The realities impacting educational institutions and challenging their boards are different from those of the past several decades and continue to change, sometimes at rapid rates. Today's boards must grapple with an illusive fiscal stability challenged by ever-growing costs of education at all levels; mounting and/or shifting government regulations related to, for example, social challenges; building- and campus-safety issues that were not apparent in past decades; society's changing values, even within the church; invasive demands of, for, and through technology and social media; and globalization of academic and professional pursuits.

In general, board members and their chairs face greater stress today because of mounting expectations. Education boards, both public and private, undergo greater scrutiny since constituents are often more informed, less trusting, and more demanding than in the past.[1] They expect board members to be active, dynamic agents of change who work closely with school leaders and stakeholders to elevate the school's position in its sphere of service.[2] Whether chairing the board of a small local school or the board of a large multinational university, an informed and effective board chair is crucial to board and institutional success.

Unfortunately, many board chairs feel unprepared to provide efficient and effective board leadership. Within church-sponsored settings, many hold their positions by virtue of other administrative appointments and are inducted into their role unexpectedly and without adequate preparation. While board chairs often do a remarkably effective job, most have no formal knowledge base and lack the specialized skills required for consistently successful board leadership.

Many potential and current board chairs lack a clear philosophical perspective regarding the purpose and nature of institutional governance and the role of a board chair in an Adventist school. While the general public sector is often unclear about the specific

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placement of responsibility for educational governance,[3] the Seventh-day Adventist Church states clearly where it places this responsibility. The Working Policy of the General Conference, FE 05 20, Agencies of Education, Section 4. Oversight, states that the church at all levels has oversight responsibility in its respective territories for its educational pursuits.[4] Church policy goes on to identify education boards at each organizational level and to spell out specific roles and functions for the various levels of the boards it establishes.[5]

It is through this system that governance responsibility for schools and higher education institutions is placed upon the shoulders of the board chairs appointed or elected by the church to exercise leadership. Chairs of the church's education boards are called to exercise courageous spiritual leadership in, as well as governance of, functions that ensure faithfulness to the church sponsor of the school, operational accountability, and the academic quality of the institution. They have to know when to draw a line in the sand to protect and maintain institutional mission, values, and standards, and simultaneously when to advance boldly into the unknown to achieve the institution's mission.

Unfortunately, often due to multiple priorities of administrative responsibilities and sometimes because of a failure of nerve, many board chairs never reach their potential and thus fail to ensure that their boards achieve optimal leadership, which will enable their institutions to reach their full potential. Moreover, many lack self-awareness and accurate assessments of their readiness to meet the needs of the board, the institution or school, and the constituencies they serve.[6] Some current chairs describe their experiences in board leadership as building a bridge while walking on it or building an airplane while flying it. There is a need for well-designed, formal training for board chairs within the church setting to prepare them for the challenges of governance in educational institutions at all levels.

Need for Board Chair Development

In their 2016 study of 635 nonprofit board chairs in the U.S.A., Beck and Associates found "a pretty glaring picture of neglect" of formal and consistent preparation for board leadership. More than half of their respondents had done "nothing special to prepare for their role as chair of a nonprofit's board."[7] My informal observations in scores of education institutions within the Seventh-day Adventist Church suggest that the proportion of those who have little or no formal preparation for their board chair role in those institutions is greater than 50 percent. My direct observations and evaluations of education board chairs in Adventist schools at all levels over the past 30 years, and particularly the most recent 13 years of international observations, have revealed a need for foundational education and technical training for current and prospective board chairs.

"Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other."[8] 2 Timothy 2:15 advises: "Work hard so God can say to you, 'Well done.' Be a good workman, one who does not need to be ashamed when God examines your work" (TLB).[9] While the admonition in this passage pertains to the study of Scripture and the witness it produces, the principle applies to all activities in life. Workers who enter the Lord's work without adequate training, and continue without obtaining such training, cannot expect the highest success. Persons of all vocations and professions must be educated for the occupation they hope to enter. Both before and during their service, they should strive to learn how to make themselves as efficient and effective as possible.[10]

As with any ministry or service, successfully performing the duties of a board chair demands intentional and ongoing education and training. Leaders, including board chairs, even those born with leadership gifts, must commit to developing their skills. Benjamin Franklin is credited with observing that "By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail."[11] Board chairs must approach the appointment as a call to development and actively seek out technical training for their role.

Typical board chair responsibilities that may be new experiences for beginning board leaders, and thus require development, include the following:

• Partnering with educational leaders (conference/union/division/General Conference directors of education; school principals/presidents; a variety of educators—teachers/professors and other educational leaders including academic and financial officers or managers, student-services leaders, and chaplains);

• Serving as a spokesperson for the organization to constituencies and the media;

• Providing both support and constructive feedback to educational administrators;

• Attending community events as an ambassador for the institution or school;

• Joining educational administrators on cultivation visits with major donors;

• Modeling the way in fundraising;

• Making board leadership service a true priority.[12]

Content for Board Chair Development Programs

When asked about the content of board development programs, chairs expressed a desire to learn more about: (1) how the institutional budget is organized, (2) the board's role in strategic planning and policy formation, (3) understanding the procedural processes of a formal board meeting, and (4) clarification of board members' governance roles and responsibilities. They also called for their own organizations and institutions to offer them more training and preparation for effective service.[13]

Harrison and Murray's study on perceived characteristics of effective versus ineffective chairs identified skills and practices for board chair development that included the following: (1) facilitation skills, (2) team-devel-

opment skills for building board cohesion, (3) collaboration skills, (4) conflict-resolution skills, (5) strategies for inspiring motivation, (6) skills for developing a working partnership with the academic leadership, and (7) skills for creating vision and direction.[14]

Philosophical theories and research findings are consistent regarding the behaviors and characteristics of effective board chairs. Various experts have identified responsibilities and requisite knowledge and skills that are similar.[15] They consistently describe seven to ten operational characteristics of strategically effective governance. This implies certain defined responsibilities and traits for board chairs, who must ensure the proper composition, strategic focus, and internal and external relationships of the board. These requirements thus present imperatives for education and training current and perspective board chairs.

Presented here are 10 fundamental mandates that combine findings from the professional literature with biblical ideals and prophetic insights for successful board leadership. These declarations define behavioral principles required for the board chair's role. They are inspired specifically by the literature on the characteristics and habits of highly effective boards,[16] elements of successful board governance,[17] and effective quality board chair models.[18]

Ten Characteristics of Effective Board Chairpersons

1. The board chair ensures a culture of inclusion on the board.

Effective education boards are diverse in composition and seek to include a variety of personal and professional attributes in their membership. The chair ensures that all members of the board are well informed and actively participate in the board's assigned duties, bringing their various perspectives and expertise to bear on their work. Managing the composition

of some denominational boards can be difficult because the bylaws and charters of many church institutions designate board membership as *ex officio*—that is, based upon administrative position in the sponsoring organization, which leaves little flexibility to exercise creativity in shaping board composition. Under these circumstances, board chairs can request the involvement of persons who are not elected members of the board to periodically serve as consultants and advisors, in order to make the board more diverse and to solicit their expertise on a variety of topics.

2. The board chair inspires and leads the board in implementing best practices relating to basic fiduciary principles.

To achieve this goal, along with providing required information, the board chair manages board time to achieve efficiency and maximum productivity in its work of: (1) preserving institutional mission, values, and quality; (2) maintaining the institution's financial health and physical safety; (3) overseeing the institution's accreditation and ensuring its statutory compliances; and (4) constantly clarifying and promoting the institution's unique purpose. It is the responsibility of the board chair to ensure that the board takes a macro-level view of the institution/school and is visionary in its perspective for setting its strategic direction and vision.

3. The board chair cultivates a healthy relationship with the president, vice chancellor, or principal of the institution or school.

Under the leadership of its chair, the effective education board partners with the campus or school administration. This relationship "is arguably the most important partnership in higher education [at all levels] because, in tandem, the board chair and the president [or principal] lead the board in defining its responsibilities, in setting the institution's strategic direction, and in ensuring that the board oper-

ates on a policy level."[19] The chair must cultivate the relationship through regular, candid communication and mutually supportive meetings with the president or principal. These interactions provide the board chair with the insights necessary to develop a true sense of the institution/school's culture, direction, and needs beyond the episodic glimpses of institution life afforded by board meeting visits.

4. The chair leads the board in selecting and enabling appropriate committees to facilitate its work.

The board chair's responsibility is to ensure a committee system that is well-structured in terms of the number of committees, member composition, and task assignments suitable for addressing the board's responsibilities; such a structure is vital to the board's effectiveness and efficiency. The board's standing committees are typically the initiators of board discussions and activities and are the primary conduits for informed decision-making.

Within this committee system, the board chair ensures the creation and ongoing functionality of a strong governance committee since the work of this committee is integral to all board functions. Its responsibilities include board member appointments; board orientation, education, and development; visioning and strategic planning, board and institutional assessments; and monitoring alignment with bylaws and policies. The governance committee might be the only committee for local school boards with responsibility for these and the other committee functions.

5. The board chair consistently maintains an awareness of strategic risk factors.

Education institutions at all levels face numerous risks—social, political, economic, and technical—associated with their work in environments that often threaten their strategic advance. Faith-based institutions face spiri-

tual challenges as well. Within the board's responsibility for strategic planning, the chair, along with the president or principal, engages in constant strategic thinking as an "enduring habit of mind and action."[20] Critical to every institution or school is the board chair's ability to understand its mission, be conscious of its past, envision its future, and anticipate threats that may negatively impact its identity and strategic trajectory. To achieve success in this role, the board chair must draw upon divine discernment and wisdom, as well as appropriate training and consultation with a variety of experts.

6. The chair leads the board in providing oversight of the institution's pursuit of its mission for academic quality and spiritual faithfulness in its curricula and in teaching and learning activities.

Central to all board functions is the chair's responsibility to focus the board and education partners (president/principal, faculty and staff, and education leaders of the church) on institution identity and mission-true qualities in teaching and learning, service, and campus life as top priorities. For tertiary institutions, this focus must include scholarship and academic and artistic creativity, as well. Faith-based education institutions pursue academic purpose and spiritual purpose as one integrated mission, and the board chair must lead in ensuring that there is an integrated mission focus. Faithfulness to mission is essential for education institutions. However, at one time or another, all faith-based organizations face mission drift.[21] In fact, 95 percent of hundreds of Christian leaders surveyed at the Q Conference in Los Angeles in 2013 identified "Mission Drift as a challenging issue to faith-based nonprofit organizations."[22] While the group was not surprised at the finding because this problem is broadly acknowledged, they were alarmed that so little is done to protect against it (see Box 1).

7. The chair must lead the board in providing oversight of the institution's spiritual faithfulness beyond its curricula and teaching and learning activities, in order to protect and enhance the institution's general spiritual ethos.

Church-sponsored schools and institutions must reflect the beliefs and values of their sponsoring church. The board, under the chair's leadership, must determine, along with the sponsoring organization (for K-12, the local conference or union; for higher education institutions, the union or division and constituency), whether the school/institution will be operated primarily for the membership—who are expected to comprise the great majority of the enrollment—or operated as a mission school/institution that recruits students mainly from the general population as well as those who live in close proximity to the school. In either case, the chair must lead the board and school/institution administration in its commitment to church beliefs and values in its hiring of faculty and staff. Further, the board, under the chair's leadership, is responsible for ensuring that the school or campus culture, atmosphere, and activities outside the classrooms, both on- and off-campus, are fully representative of the beliefs and values of the sponsoring church.

8. The board chair has the responsibility to embrace and maintain a commitment to shared governance among board members.

Effective board chairs recognize that their board colleagues, school administrators, faculty, and staff, are also professionals and must be respected as such.[23] There is no place for a "Lone Ranger" leader in education governance. While the board

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Box 1. Protecting Against Mission Drift.

While challenges resulting from mission drift are most obvious in higher education, primary and secondary schools face the same difficulties. The chair must be intentional in leading the board to do the following:

- Believe the Gospel is their most precious asset;
- Make hard decisions to protect and promote the school's mission;
- Assume that the institution will face mission drift and build safeguards against it;
- Maintain clarity about institutional mission;
- Understand their top priorities;
- Set the cultural tone for the organization;
- Hire first and foremost for heart and character;
- Partner with donors who support the institution's full mission;
- Track indicators that measure and reflect how well the institution's mission is being fulfilled;
- Understand that the gospel demands excellence in their work;
- Preserve the institution's sustaining rituals and practices;
- Boldly proclaim the mission's core tenets to prevent drift;
- Recognize that local constituent churches (in the case of higher education, the local campus church) are anchors to a thriving mission.*

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* Taken from Peter Greer et al., *Mission Drift: The Unspoken Crisis Facing Leaders, Charities, and Churches* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House, 2014), 33-177.

chair must be personally decisive and action-oriented, he or she must be ever mindful of the strength in the inclusive, participative team. To that end, chairs must conduct board business in an open and inclusive manner.

The successful board chair will build teamwork and collaboration through (a) ensuring that board committees function smoothly, (b) accessing a wide range of individual expertise in decision-making, (c) considering the school's multiple constituencies, and (d) engaging its various stakeholders in decision processes. Particularly in higher education, shared governance is an absolute requirement. Faculty and support staff, as well as students, must be involved in decisions regarding academic and scholarly pursuits, campus life, and planning. "When the board chair comes from the corporate [or church] world with little engagement in academe . . . it is tempting to be directive."[24] While leadership style can vary in different situations, the chair must guard against the board falling into authoritarian management models.

9. The board chair requires and practices principles of accountability and transparency.

Education boards are accountable to their constituencies and their church sponsors. The board chair has a responsibility to protect the trust relationship implied in this accountability. Ethics and integrity must characterize the chair's personal life as well as that of the board and institution or school.

This responsibility includes, for example, reviewing the institution's bylaws at least annually, producing updates when needed; structuring and managing substantive meeting agendas that avoid being overly scripted and allow for open discussions and questions; and fostering clear and frequent two-way communication with all partners and stakeholders. Board chairs must be aware that challenges to the board's effectiveness and accountability such as disengagement, dysfunction, and misconduct are ever-present

threats, with disengagement typically being the primary concern. Board members' focus can easily be drawn from the intermittent board responsibilities because their daily responsibilities demand their time and attention. Even engaged boards are in danger of slipping into dysfunctional modes of engagement (see Box 2). Board member misconduct, including unethical, illegal, or immoral behaviors, is a threat to board effectiveness and credibility and will oblige the board chair to initiate board action for reprimand or removal of the offending member.

10. The board chair intentionally cultivates and models best practices and integrity in board leadership.

The basic attributes of strong board chairs include a dedication to mission, the capacity to leverage the right type of influence in an appropriate manner, the right leadership skills, and a forward-looking perspective.[25] Legon's outline of the specific traits of the chair of a highly effective board includes the following:

• A feeling of partnership with the chief executive [president or principal];

• Experience in leading voluntary boards of complex organizations;

• A commitment to focus the board and its members on issues that matter rather than those that are nei-

ther the responsibility of the board nor important to the institution's or school's strategic goals;

• A familiarity with the interests of internal and external stakeholders, and the ability to represent the board to those groups; and

• A readiness to be the voice of the board as both an advocate and a storyteller to key external constituents, in coordination with institution or school leadership.[26]

In a 2015 BoardSource study, "Leading With Intent,"[27] board chairs scored low in frequency of engagement with the community. A very low percentage of them engaged in advocacy, spoke to the media, or met with current and potential donors on a frequent basis. Board chairs would benefit from acquiring critical leadership skills in advocacy, funder and donor cultivation, media relations, and community engagement.

Summary and Recommendations

From the moment college and university trustees or local school board members assume their seats at the board table, they need to be knowledgeable about their institution or school, understand their role and responsibilities, be aware of the skills required for their roles, and commit to honing these skills and working as

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Box 2. Board Diseases.

Larry Walker describes a variety of board dysfunctions as board or governance diseases, such as the following:

1. *Agendasclerosis*—poorly structured and executed agendas that do not guide meetings in efficient and effective ways;

2. *Dialogue deficit disorder*—a social condition that stifles member input of ideas and questions and dilutes their contributions to governance tasks; and

3. *Knowledgedystrophy*—the malady of making decisions without the necessary data and information, which results in actions that lack strategic direction and fail to meet institutional/school needs.**

** Larry Walker, "Dangerous Board Diseases: Prevent and Cure Common Governance Ailments With These Practical Prescriptions," *Trustee Magazine* (September 2011): http://htnys.org/governance/docs/2011-11-18_dangerous_ board_diseases.pdf.

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a team. However, many board chairs (and members) feel they are not prepared adequately for this role.[28]

The institution's constituency and sponsoring organization should take responsibility for identifying, providing, and requiring board chair education and training. As opportunities arise, these same entities should encourage and/or support board chairs in their pursuit of formal education and training from other self-selected sources.

Church organizations should establish systems of formal board chair preparation, and where possible, include broad-based succession planning to develop potential board leaders. Ideally, there should be a pipeline of board chair candidates who are identified and prepared well before their appointment to board leadership. This is difficult in a church system that has structured into its mandates policies for the church's ecclesiastical leaders to chair its education boards. However, constituencies and church leadership can include board chair training in their general leadership-development programs and can provide mentoring relationships and skill-specific training for board chairs that cover necessary topics as they assume the role and continue throughout their tenure. Informal workshops, including Web-based seminars and other Internet resources, and books and articles on relevant topics shared online could be used to a greater degree.

Research and anecdotal data indicate that often, even though these online resources are available, most chairs do not access the Internet, workshops, books, or other resources that could help prepare them for their role (see Box 3). Perhaps this is due to the low priority afforded board work in competition with the many other pressing responsibilities many chairs must carry in their fulltime assignments. We are reminded that "It is the privilege of all who bear responsibilities in the work of the gospel to be apt learners in the school of Christ."[29] For this reason, board chair development must become priority with board chairs themselves,

and their employing church organizations and constituencies must actively seek to provide education and training that will nurture and strengthen those that lead Adventist schools. ✏

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Box 3. Resources for Board Chair Development.

Job-embedded Training

There are ways of engaging board chairs in education and training that are minimally intrusive to their schedules and that will benefit them in broader ways as leaders. For example, they may take better advantage of online discussions and Web-based seminars as part of their responsibilities if these are built into their job descriptions by their employing church organizations and constituencies.

Division-sponsored Leadership Education and Training
https://www.interamerica.org/event/seld-conference-2018/

(a) One excellent example of a broad-based mandatory leadership-development model has been developed by the Inter-American Division (IAD), which funds leadership education and training for all of its leaders. The training is organized and run by a high-level administrator who also serves as its leadership-development coordinator and facilitated by an array of administrators and educators who are invited annually to teach specific topic segments. The IAD rotates topics from its structured curriculum each year and awards certificates to those who complete the required sessions. This model could be easily adapted for use at various levels to enhance the preparedness, confidence, and performance of education board chairs worldwide.

(b) Divisions could include their board chairs and perhaps board committee chairs in their quinquennial education conferences, which feature professional-development opportunities. In these settings, the divisions could offer a focused strand of resources specifically for the chairs, while also providing educators, chairs, and church administrators with the opportunity to better understand one another's challenges and responsibilities.

Online Resources

Several other online options are available, including the following:

(a) Materials and seminars in the Adventist Learning Community leadership collection: https://www.adventistlearningcommunity.com/search_results/courses.

(b) Online materials at the General Conference Department of Education Website and several division sites (including the South Pacific Division, which services a sizable mailing list with leadership-development materials monthly): https://education.adventist.org/resources/.

(c) Free leadership-training options provided by Adventist colleges and universities: Andrews University: https://www.andrews.edu/sed/leadership_dept/educational_leadership/webinars/previous-webinars.html; Southern Adventist University: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLU_ler_P2Nypv-zBS3gleYf-Dir1tWTIH.

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