



## The Top 10 'Failure Strategies' for Your Board of Trustees

Vol. 17 No. 2

When you look at a familiar topic from a different perspective, you'll often see something new. Just as Pythagoras thought in reverse to prove that the square root of two was an irrational number, a "backwards-thinking" view of Board characteristics can give you a fresh angle on Board operations.

ISM usually tackles the concept of the <u>strategic Board</u> from a positive slant. This time, we'll look at the issue from this perspective: *List the top 10 strategies or actions you would take if you wanted your organization to fail utterly, and then put systems and processes in place to ensure that you do not do any of them.* For each strategy/action, we'll offer an "antidote"—ways to ensure that you avoid these all-too-common pitfalls.

As Board President, this thinking-in-reverse approach can be a useful tool as you build both your own and your Trustees' leadership. The fresh perspective it provides will support you and your fellow Trustees as you shape the future of both your Board and your school.

## **Top 10 Failure Strategies**

The following 10 strategies are likely to help your school fail—that is, to push you in the direction of:

- reduced solvency;
- · weakened organizational stability;
- increased bureaucracy; and/or
- ineffective personnel management approaches. (Lowered faculty/staff morale inevitably accompanies these approaches.)
- 1. Set tuition annually, and do so by leading with the question, "How much of an increase can the parent body stand next year?"

Antidote: Develop a multi-year strategic financial plan by (a) describing the characteristics of your ideal school six years from now; (b) "costing" that ideal school; and (c) determining the (net) tuition gradient necessary to pay for it.

2. Select your new Trustees by asking each spring (within your Nominating Committee), "Does anybody know anyone who'd be willing to serve on our Board next year?"

Antidote: Form a Committee on Trustees that will "profile the characteristics" of the individuals you need to support the Board-level implications and carry out the tasks set in your strategic planning document. Potential new Trustees can then be approached with statements of this sort: "We have identified you as the best person in our metropolitan area to fill the 'non-profit marketing expert' slot in our Board profile. Do you have a few minutes for me to describe our plans and your potential role in them?"

3. Have a large number of standing (not ad hoc) committees, and use only current Board members on them

Antidote: Form most <u>Board committees</u> each May or June in response to the questions "How shall we organize ourselves to accomplish our Board agenda this year?" and "Who would be the best individuals (Board members or others) to help us meet our goals?"

4. Use a generic form (preferably not specific to private-independent schools) for Board self-evaluation, and ask each Trustee to complete the form annually.

Antidote: Ask your Committee on Trustees to rate the Board's performance annually. This <u>assessment</u> will be based on the Board's successful or unsuccessful completion of the annual Board agenda established the previous summer (and derived from your strategic plan).

5. Use a generic form for evaluation of your School Head, and ask each Board member to complete the form annually; distribute a version of the same form to your faculty each year, and, finally, to your parent body.

Antidote: Ask your Head Support and Evaluation Committee to assist your School Head throughout the school year based upon her/his progress on goals agreed upon the previous summer, and derived primarily from your strategic plan. Use the data sources implied by each goal in order to not simply "evaluate," but to enhance the Head's (and, thus, the school's) performance.

6. Make sure your full-Board meetings are "current-events" focused, with the Head's report as the centerpiece each time.

Antidote: Write an annual Board agenda each summer. Focus the action on a Board committee proposal (not a Board committee report) at the heart of every full-Board meeting throughout the year, just as has always (presumably) been the case with your annual budget-approval meeting.

7. Try to focus your Board's energies on your school's curriculum and instruction, and, pursuant to this focus, form as many Board-level "education committees" as possible (e.g., Academic Committee, Cocurricular Committee, Character Development Committee).

Antidote: Since Board-level direction and oversight of faculty and student programs is inherently confusing to faculty and staff members, who (correctly) view the School Head as the "boss," establish a Board-level policy calling for all student- and faculty-related committees to be "School Head committees." Such committees may, when appropriate, have Board members serving on them, but they remain the School Head's committees nonetheless. Enhanced organizational clarity will result.

8. Place as many "constituent representatives" (e.g., Parent Association representative, faculty representative, student council representative, alumni/ae representative) on the Board as possible; make sure each is elected by the appropriate constituency.

Antidote: Communicate proactively and rapidly with all constituent groups. Do so in writing via your newsletter and special mailings. Handle in-person communication by sending one or more Board members—following each Board meeting—to the next meeting of the Parent Association, faculty council, student council, and alumni/ae council. Continuously educate your constituencies regarding the fact that the Board itself is not a constituent representative body, but a self-perpetuating trusteeship charged with underwriting the school's mission for the long-term future.

No "special lobbying" from any particular constituent viewpoint can be accommodated when the only constituent is the next generation of students (20 to 30 years from today). (Your Committee on Trustees "profile" —see "Antidote" in Failure Strategy No. 2—should attend to the "representativeness" of the overall mix of Board members; this is altogether different from asking your constituent groups to supply "representatives"—congressional style—to the Board. Your Board is not a congress, but a trusteeship.)

9. Require your administration to follow the corporate wisdom of identifying the top 10% of your faculty performers for bonuses and the bottom 10% for dismissal, thereby upgrading your faculty steadily every year.

Antidote: Craft a set of <u>Purpose and Outcome Statements</u> (short mission, Portrait of the Graduate, Characteristics of Professional Excellence for faculty).8 Use the Characteristics of Professional Excellence (CPE) as the lens through which to evaluate your faculty. Initiate a <u>broadbanding</u>/pay-for-performance system that differentiates among your teachers according to their performance against this agreed-upon set of criteria. Do not use corporate evaluation systems; use this education-specific version of differentiated rewards.

10. Accumulate as much debt as your lenders will allow.

Antidote: Write a strategic financial plan (see again "Antidote" under Failure Strategy No. 1) that works from the premise that debt is nearly always the wrong solution to any problem. Institute aggressive major gifts and cash reserve development programs as the desirable "big dollar" solutions.

## **Three Follow-Up Steps**

Examine each of the "Top 10 Failure Strategies" listed and discussed above. Then, if any or all of them seem to apply in your Board's context, consider these three steps.

- Analyze each failure strategy in your annual Board agenda-setting and committee-formation
  exercise so that your Board's function and structure consistently reflect the avoidance of the items
  on the list. For example, make sure you determine your committee structure and full-Board
  calendar after completing the Board agenda for the coming year (see Failure Strategies Nos. 3
  and 6).
- Feature each failure strategy in your annual new-Trustee <u>orientation</u> program. Explain each of the antidotes in as much detail as your new Trustees require to become clear on their implications.

Ask your Committee on Trustees Chair to "grade" your Board on any of the failure strategies you
find especially threatening. Then present these findings as a quarterly mini-report in full-Board
meetings. (Do this in writing, perhaps in the form of an actual student report card. Include
recommendations for correction and improvement, much as your teachers would with their
students.)



Copyright© 2000-2011 isminc.com All Rights Reserved.

copyright notice