When I became the acting president of Hamilton College in 1999, I already knew a lot about the college. I am a 1996 Hamilton graduate, the parent of a former student, and I have served for 12 years on the college’s governing board. Still, when Hamilton President Eugene Tobin took a much-deserved sabbatical, I learned more about Hamilton during my six months in the presidency than in all my previous time associated with the college. Much of what I learned will make me — and, I expect, my fellow board members — better in the future.

An unusual level of alumni involvement distinguishes Hamilton. Typically, more than 55 percent of alumni contribute every year to the annual fund, and more than a third volunteer to recruit students, raise funds, counsel undergraduates about careers, provide internships, conduct alumni events, and participate in other activities. As is the case at other colleges, Hamilton's board sets the tone for financial and volunteer support.

Yet despite this high level of alumni involvement and my own active participation with my alma mater, I had a superficial understanding about many important facets of the college and wondered whether my fellow board members did as well. Naturally, I recognize it is unrealistic to expect that board members who typically visit the campus just three or four times a year will ever have the same breadth and depth of knowledge as the president and senior administrators who are charged with the daily operations of the institution.

A New Understanding of the College

Soon after I became president, the impact of policy decisions became clear to me — much more so than when I was a board member. For example, deciding to admit an additional 20 to 30 students from the waiting list or planning for a larger class, though attractive from a financial point of view, had significant ramifications in the day-to-day life of the campus. Admitting more students means hiring more staff members. Where would we find additional housing? And if the new hires were adjuncts, how could we be certain they would be as qualified and as committed to the institution as full-time faculty members?

This level of detail rarely makes it to the boardroom, but as president, I could see how a tempting financial solution might create an irritant in campus life.

My experience as a college president has made me much more aware of the nuances of board decision making. Many issues that boards are asked to consider require much broader scrutiny. Switching roles for six months taught me five fundamental lessons that may help boards and board members become more effective.

1. Balance the membership of board member committees.
   Hamilton's board of directors, like many governing boards, consists disproportionately of business executives, investors, and successful entrepreneurs. Their acumen is in finance and in running a business, so they tend to be most interested in the issues — fund-raising, endowment performance, and investments — with which they are most familiar and where results are tangible. They tend not to be so comfortable with the other components that make a college successful such as its staff, programs, and facilities.

   The tendency among board members to gravitate toward finance is understandable. After all, board members have a fiduciary responsibility to the college, and given today's fiscal pressures, no board can be blamed for being preoccupied with an organization's assets. But a balanced budget and a growing endowment are only two measures of an organization's health.

   It is equally important that all board committees have the appropriate firepower if the mission of the institution is to be fulfilled. The committee on board members should look carefully at the distribution of talent and influence among the various standing committees to ensure that every function has an important voice at the boardroom table.

2. Seek, within limits, close encounters with leaders of the organization.
   In my six months as president, I met and spent time with most of the faculty, the swimming coach, the chair of the chemistry department, the director of the career center — people board members typically would not encounter. Yet the insights and opinions of such individuals can give board members a much broader understanding of an institution.

   Recognizing this untapped resource, we restructured board weekends at Hamilton to facilitate even greater informal interaction between the board and various college...
Considering the important role the board has within a nonprofit, why would any organization be content with a sub-standard board — a board with inadequate performance and fulfillment of its responsibilities — and not be open and willing to improve its members' individual and collective performance? The best way to make the case for board improvement is to conduct periodic board self-assessments to identify your board’s strengths and areas in need of improvement.

**Why assess performance?**
Board self-assessment provides you with the opportunity to
- look internally at the board itself
- reflect on your board members’ individual and shared responsibilities
- identify different perceptions and opinions among board members
- determine areas of responsibility that need attention
- use the results as a springboard for board improvement
- increase the level of board teamwork
- clarify mutual board/staff expectations
- clarify common objectives as well as check that everyone is speaking the same language, i.e. ensuring that everyone abides by a shared vision
- demonstrate accountability as a serious organizational value
- display credibility to funders and other external audiences

**Getting ready**
Planning well is half the battle. Here are some tips that help board members get excited about the assessment process and prepare for it.
- Include periodic self-assessment among your bylaws clauses. It is the surest method to make the case for assessment if your bylaws include it as one of the principle policies for the board.
- Task the governance committee (not your chief executive or the chair) to ensure that assessment takes place regularly and is well organized. This committee is the permanent structure of your board; officers and chief executives change. Also self-assessment is a board commitment; when the call for action comes from within the team, the “voice” is different.
- Plan to conduct a self-assessment every two to three years. It is not necessary to conduct one every year — you need time to implement any potential changes and learn new ways to function as a board.
- Your auditing firm, as an outside monitor, should also make sure that the processes in the bylaws get respected.
- Keep in mind that it is not going to be an organizational assessment. The entire focus is on the board, on its work, structure, and dynamics.

**Making process work**
How the board conducts a self-assessment influences how successful it will be while securing its role as a standard process.
- Clarify the purpose of self-assessment to everyone. It is not to be judgmental or focus only on weaknesses and negative aspects. Its purpose is to help the board get to the next phase of development. One of its benefits is to act as a planning tool for the board.
- Discuss the questionnaire your board has chosen to use to make sure everyone is familiar with the process and has a chance to ask detailed questions.
- Expect confidentiality. Opinions and comments expressed during the process should not be attributed to individual board members but should be shared in the aggregate report. Confidentiality is the only way to ensure that everyone shares honest opinions without a filter or fear of being criticized.
- If possible, rely on an outside facilitator to collect the completed questionnaires, analyze the comments, and provide the full board with a report. This third party confidentiality brings an added level of neutrality to the end discussion.
- Keep in mind that comments and opinions are simply perceptions of board members. There are no wrong answers.
- Provide each board member with the opportunity to comment on how he/she assesses his/her own performance vis-à-vis the full board. It is often quite educational to see the results. Not surprising, but often, board members see themselves in a better light than they see the full board’s performance.
- Include your chief executive in the process. Even if the chief executive is not a voting member of the board, he/she works closely with the board and should have an insightful perspective of the board’s effectiveness.
• Make sure that the results of the assessment get shared with the full board and action is taken afterwards. No follow up is the worst consequence to self-assessment.

For some boards, the first self-assessment experience feels awkward and somewhat daunting. However, if the process and the consequences are accepted, the first assessment should result in a beneficial learning experience. Embarking on a second assessment proves that the board has learned the importance of monitoring its own effectiveness. Assessment is about the future and ensuring that the board’s contribution to the organization is always top quality.

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