

Creating a Cadre of **LEADERS** on College and University Boards

BY E.B. WILSON

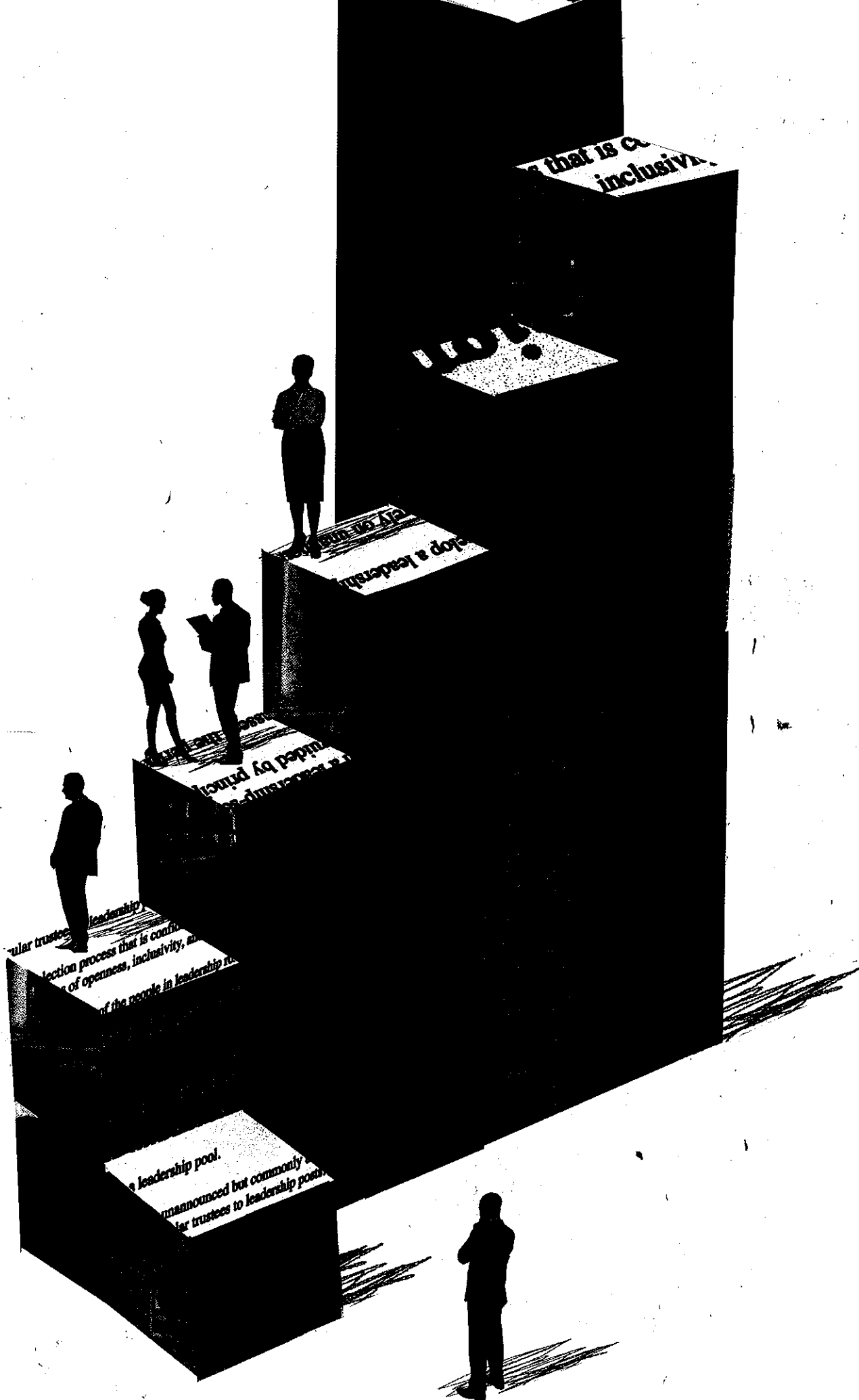


TAKEAWAYS

- 1 By not reforming governance policies and practices to improve the efficacy of current and future board leaders, boards will find themselves irrelevant to the strategic future of their college or university.
- 2 There are 10 steps to improving long-term board governance. These include rejecting outdated policies, the active recruitment and cultivation of future board leaders, and regular assessment of board leaders based on established written criteria.
- 3 By being intentional and careful, boards can go a long way toward consistent, high-performing leadership as they advance the vital process of institutional transformation.

MANY MEMBERS OF COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY BOARDS MAY believe that the careful management of the composition of a board will ultimately determine the success of its governance performance. That may be considered a truth in some quarters and suggests a relatively easy path to helping boards manage the transformative changes that are accelerating across higher education.

Yet while the process of thoughtfully determining who will sit around the board table is a mandatory first step for successful board functioning, it is not enough. The board must also carefully create several board policies and practices that systematically identify, select, train, and assess the performance of current and future board leaders.



The fact is that volunteer boards that do not reform their governance practices and earn their roles as institutional leaders will find themselves to be irrelevant to the strategic future of the college or university.

Boards may want to follow these 10 steps to build the necessary policies and practices for successful board governance over the long haul:

STEP 1

Develop a board leadership plan that covers the next three to five years.

This is a core best practice, along with such other needs as creation of an institutional strategic plan. The process begins by having the governance committee ask its members, as a top priority, to begin to match the current known and expected demands on the board's leaders with people now on the board or with potential additions to the board. Some boards may chose a different committee or person to conduct the same leadership assessment, but the governance committee is often the most attractive option.

Volunteer boards that do not reform their governance practices and earn their roles as institutional leaders will find themselves to be irrelevant to the strategic future of the college or university.

Volunteer boards that do not reform their governance practices and earn their roles as institutional leaders will find themselves to be irrelevant to the strategic future of the college or university.

The plan that emerges will almost always be imperfect because of the surprises and unknowns that future developments will pose for the leadership team. Priorities are

constantly competing, and boards may experience real or perceived distractions that cause them to stray from their central objectives.

For example, a board may be focused on planning a major fundraising campaign and lining up a new board member or two with experience in nonprofit fundraising. But it may then find itself instead spending considerable time dealing with unexpected reductions in state or federal support.

Even given such distractions, however, and recognizing that they deserve the energy of highly experienced trustees, starting the leadership-planning process is essential. It conditions the board to allocate time to look ahead and reach at least preliminary conclusions about future requirements for board leaders.

STEP 2

Clearly identify a core number of leadership positions.

The structure of most boards includes several of those positions. Although public boards are typically smaller, independent institutions can have as many as 20 to 25 leadership positions when the board chair, vice chair, and chair and vice chair positions for standing and ad hoc committees are considered. Those are the positions for which individual trustees may develop and demonstrate leadership skills.

STEP 3

Create written performance criteria.

Those criteria should be for each of the core leadership positions, in line with development of a board culture that embraces and promotes the principle of accountability for performance. The general board membership should discuss and approve the performance criteria, so that all trustees understand that the board has a thought-out process for defining and responding to its workload and leadership challenges.

STEP 4

Consciously work to attract and recruit trustees with the potential



to become board leaders. Being a successful corporate leader does not automatically translate to being an effective board leader. Generous philanthropy signals support for and devotion to the institution, but it does not guarantee that a generous donor will also meet the criteria needed to fill leadership positions on the board. Tenure as a trustee is important, but by itself does not forecast leadership potential.

As recommended above, developing a plan and then specifying leadership positions and the performance criteria for them should help the board anticipate its needs and allow it to seek out new trustees with the particular skills required. That includes being clear that new board members must have the personal and professional time available for board work, be dedicated to the historical values of the institution, and demonstrate a flexible spirit of inquiry that indicates their willingness to accept new governance responsibilities over time.

The potential recruits must also display a personal code of conduct that indicates ability to organize work and to attract loyalty from the people with whom they work closely, such as on committees or subcommittees. Rather than telling new board members that they may be tapped for leadership positions in the future, it is best just to include the general leadership criteria within the statement of traits sought for all board candidates.

STEP 5

Establish a leadership pool. Once you have recruited talented new board members, you should identify a list of experienced trustees who are well-suited to filling the designated leadership positions. Using the written performance expectations for each leadership position should lead to identifying which trustees can be considered as present and future candidates for the most responsible positions on the board.

Every board structure contains leadership positions that offer opportunities to measure performance. Begin the process for identifying a new board member by

naming him or her as a vice chair of a committee, then advance him or her to chair a committee—perhaps one that is governed by a new and different mission. You can also make him or her an ad hoc committee chair as yet another way of growing and measuring leadership potential.

Or, to determine a new chair, you can develop a pool of tested board members in the position of board vice chair. Tenure for the position is short, so more than one person would be in that pool, giving the board the opportunity to make an ultimate election of the board chair from among a diverse number of members.

This process allows the board to assess the performance of new board members within the pool of potential leaders because they are assigned to specific leadership positions over time. The practice also gives top board leaders the ability to move individuals around to handle a variety of responsibilities and allows them to match the talents and experience of people with the evolving demands of specific leadership posts.

STEP 6

Do not rely on unspoken but commonly used practices for advancing particular trustees to leadership posts. It bears repeating: Many boards use long service on a board or a generous level of financial support as de facto criteria for naming particular trustees to these positions. Develop alternative types of recognition and rewards that honor these important attributes, but do not consider them as automatic indicators of leadership potential.

Avoid establishing set lines of succession. That takes into account the reality that the performance criteria discussed earlier commonly demand new and different talents and experience as board work evolves over time. Boards need the flexibility to acknowledge that a given trustee might well have been perfect for a leadership position a few years ago, but that, given the demands of that position now, it might not be a good match—or in the best interests of the individual trustee or the board as a whole.

STEP 7

Design a leadership-selection process that is confidential but that also is guided by principles of openness, inclusivity, and transparency.

These are not contradictory principles. Specific, individual names must be protected by confidentiality rules so as to not develop a culture of winners and losers. But the board's constituents must also know that a working process is in place that is open, inclusive, and transparent. That process will demonstrate to board members and to the institution that the board does not make leadership decisions in a proverbial smoke-filled room.

At the same time, however, board leaders should stress that they are trying to train people for particular responsibilities over time and are attempting to match trustees' talents with the needs of specific committee positions in an environment of rapid change. That, of course, requires that board leaders do everything possible to foster trust among board members by clearly outlining the responsibilities, expertise, and time commitments required by particular committee assignments.

STEP 8

Regularly assess the performance of the people in leadership roles.

The practice of performance assessment applies to all board members, but building a pool of leadership talent carries with it the urgent and special requirement that those in leadership positions be regularly assessed. Flexibility is again the rule; therefore, the timing of leadership assessments should reflect the need to develop a matrix of demonstrated performances: proven individuals separated from those who require additional experience.

Tenure as a trustee is important, but by itself does not forecast leadership potential.

Building a pool of leadership talent carries with it the urgent and special requirement that those in leadership positions be regularly assessed.

Existing self-assessment surveys can be customized to create a database of information reflecting board leaders' assessments of their own success in meeting performance expectations. Board decision makers can then add their own assessments of individual leaders to this database—thus helping them

engage in conversations with individuals and making decisions about whether to shift leaders around, including asking some trustees to shoulder additional or fewer responsibilities. Over time, this database will provide a wealth of information about the board's leaders.

STEP 9

Assign leadership mentors. This is a sensitive task because some boards don't have a history of strong leadership that has produced a pool of people who can be effective mentors. In many instances, it will be the members of the governance committee who can best recognize emerging board leaders and help them develop. Whatever the current culture of the board, it is important to add this level of support for those who are beginning to serve as committee chairs or vice chairs or in other board positions of responsibility.

STEP 10

Determine who is specifically responsible for the process of building the board's leadership cadre. Once begun, the process is not onerous in terms of time. But making the decision to add vitality and long-range planning to leadership selection—and making it a known and consequential board commitment—requires that the responsibility be delegated to the governance committee or a similar

panel, depending on how the board is structured.

The membership of this committee can be distinctly shaped so that the responsibility for leadership development can be fulfilled. Many governance committees choose to charge a subcommittee with the responsibility for meeting leadership-development demands. Such a subcommittee might add members—emeritus trustees, for example—to strengthen the subcommittee's ability to perform its mission. Whatever the organizational solution, those responsible for the design and execution of the leadership program must fully understand that the quality of the board's leadership development ranks high among the factors that will ultimately underwrite the board's success.

Following the steps that I've outlined will build the strength of the board today and in the future. The steps may require, as I've noted, rejection of historic practices or board cultures that embody an "old boy" network. Instead, the steps focus on the professional identification, training, assessment, and promotion of a cadre of current and future leaders. By following them, a board can go a long way toward consistent, high-performing leadership as it also advances the vital process of institutional transformation. ■

AUTHOR: E.B. Wilson is chairman emeritus of the board of St. Lawrence University.

SHIP LINKS: David Rubenstein and Richard Riddell, "Board Chairs and Board Professionals: Partners in Governance." January/February 2014. Lyn Trodahl Chynoweth, "Shared Lessons about the Board Chair's Challenges." May/June 2011.

"Leadership in Governance: The View from AGB's Current and Former Board Chairs." September/October 2010.

OTHER

RESOURCES:
The Governance Committee (AGB Press, 2013).

