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What makes an Effective Governing Board? 3 Main Lessons Learnt Over 15 Years of Interacting with Board Members

When we hear the word governance, the term rings many bells and we find ourselves thinking: leadership, direction, control, compliance, conformance and if good enough, identifying and mitigating risk. Yet, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) vary in the importance they place on Governance. Some take it seriously, so they have governance as part of their top strategic priorities and depicted in their strategic plan with goals, objectives, initiatives and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to monitor. Some have it at a lower level, within their objectives and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). The majority acknowledge its importance, yet, it does not necessarily appear in their key plans.

My experience of over 25 years of working in education, 15 of which have been spent interacting with diverse governing board members has taught me that putting together an effective governing body can be quite challenging. Governance is one of those areas where there is a tendency to believe that there are varied solutions, given that institutions differ in their maturity level, contexts, resources, mission, visions and structures. Yet, my journey has taught me some common valuable lessons regarding what constitutes good governance.

Lesson one: Governance is a multi-dimension aspect: Static and Dynamic

I have always thought of governance as an iceberg where you have two spheres: a static aspect and a dynamic aspect. The Static Aspect is merely the tip of the iceberg where you see the formal documentation and formation of Boards, compositions, terms of references, policies and procedures, etc. However, you have to squint and look closely to see the dynamic aspect of governance, the larger under-water part, which is about relationships: leadership, collegiality, authority patterns, roles and communication.

I have seen universities and colleges competing fiercely to attract reputable names to sit on their various Boards and Executive Committees. However, this mine of expertise sometimes remains limited in what it can offer due to relationship dynamics. What more, the power tension and egos of members has the potential of affecting the quality of decisions taken. This somehow shifts our attention to stress the importance of the hidden dynamic aspect. Setting the tone of interaction (or the lack of it), therefore, comes across as critical for the success of the Boards. I find that the selection of Chairs and their Deputies is key to setting the tone through shaping attitude, behaviour and conversation. The rest is left to the members themselves to demonstrate value and conscious appreciation of such relationships. One can't be a know it all or that they are right all the time. They must demonstrate ability to work together as a team.

Lesson two : You need to help your Board members do a better job

Board members who come from the industry, the community, other official and professional bodies are successful smart people in their own domains. However, when they step into the educational

arena, you will need to meet them in the middle with a clear role specification as many need some preparation, education and support to understand the nature of the HEI. You need to invest time into creating an induction program to orient them on their roles. Drawing a clear line between governance and management can't be stressed enough. The overlap and confusion between these two areas is likely to cause conflict, tension, and inefficiency. Governing boards need to do more governing and less managing. Furthermore, the fuzzy area between what qualifies as HEI autonomy and what counts as accountability needs unpacking. Again, role specification, terms of references, codes of conducts and policies play a vital role here. Board members should have the ability to challenge, question and hold the HEI accountable in a professional manner. Clear communication is a vital channel in terms of dealing with complex ideas in a simple manner. Most importantly, it means communicating for the purpose of genuinely learning from each other and growing on the job.

An essential part of helping your boards is also to offer them opportunities to measure their effectiveness. HEIs have the options of either designing their own tools, surveys and matrixes, hiring a professional third party to objectively performs the same or using one of the readily available online platforms specialised in reviewing governance and providing feedback.

Lesson three: you need to bring a healthy balance and diversity in skills and expertise

Whether it is a Board of Directors (BoD) or a Board of Trustees (BoT), you need people who have the sound blend of skills, backgrounds, expertise, competencies and gender in the Board. Investing time and effort in charting these skills ensuring that each member brings (preferably) more than one strength is another success factor. Many institutions seek members who are savvy in areas such as finance, business, education and law. These skills are undeniably important. However, they need to be complimented by passion for education, patience, commitment, curiosity and high sense of responsibility. While appreciating the busy schedule of people of such calibre, being a board member means acknowledging that such responsibility inevitably involves giving time and effort. Governing board members need to take time to really read, review and analyse different types of data. Effective boards need to feel comfortable performing time-consuming tasks whether it is sifting through reports or going through certain institution wise policies or receiving information from various sources. In fact, in some cases forming an opinion will require going an extra mile trying to fit the institution within a wider context by reading around what is happening, both nationally and internationally.

Recruiting board members needs to be a process that goes beyond back tapping and asking acquaintances to join the board. It needs to be competitive, purposeful, fair and objective.