

## Conflict or Consensus? Seven Steps To Creating an Effective Board

Dr. Mark Drummond, Chancellor, Los Angeles Community College District

**H**ow do you move a board of seven elected trustees from highly diverse backgrounds, dissimilar talents, interests, experiences, work styles and levels of commitment? In the past twelve months, the Los Angeles Community College District has had to come to a consensus on decentralizing our nine colleges, hiring two new presidents and three interim presidents, and launching a major bond campaign. Each of these actions provided multiple opportunities for board conflict and stagnation and/or cooperation and progression. As Chancellor, I have developed seven basic principles on working with board members to form an effective team.

- **Learn as much as possible about each board member as an individual.**

Recognize that board members are public servants who have professional, personal and political lives. Learn pertinent aspects about their past: offices held; political activity and interests; family life and interests; professional activities and relationships. Listen to them carefully in private and public sessions. Pay close attention to recurring themes in questions that they ask as these hold important clues about their values and issues of importance to them.

- **Build a relationship with each board member that is individual and unique.**

When possible, build a relationship based on commonly held values and beliefs. Find a non-threatening way to let them know you personally, including what you believe and why you believe it. Understand that each board member has different reasons for serving and different sources of reinforcement.

When your values clash or don't coincide, determine where there might be common ground. From this, you can fashion a basis of respect, even though you may be unable to have a meeting of the minds over certain value-based issues. Focus on how you can help each board member further their goals through their own institutional behavior and establishment of values-based policy.

Know that some board members will look into matters of interest to them on campus, while others will be satisfied with you as a primary source of information and guidance. Try not to be threatened by trustees who go directly to the source; their motivation for involvement is almost always sincere and positive. Your job as CEO is to channel the energy of the trustees who get closely engaged, and to mentor them with sensitivity to their individual styles and egos. Assist them in crafting policy that will lead in the direction they desire. By bringing the micro issues into focus as small pieces of larger policy, you can usually turn what could be a negative into a positive.



Mark Drummond, PhD  
Chancellor  
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## Seven Steps To Creating an Effective Board

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- **Don't worry what a trustee who visits a campus unannounced might hear.**

If you are open and honest, and doing a decent job of communicating, trustees won't find too many surprises when they visit a campus. In the rare instance that a trustee might



Standing l-r: Chancellor Mark Drummond; Sylvia Scott-Hayes, Vice President; Althea R. Baker; Warren T. Furutani; Georgia L. Mercer, Board President; Seated l-r: Elizabeth Garfield; Kelly G. Candaele; Mona Field

be misled by partial truths or falsehoods, it is your job to set the record straight. If you can't do this, there is probably something critically wrong with your ability to communicate and work collaboratively with the board. Don't blame a trustee for probing and coming up with uncomfortable information or perspectives. Remember, as public officials we live in glass houses and must believe that disclosure is preferable to intrigue or secrets.

- **Avoid playing one trustee against another.**

Because all members of a board are not likely to share identical backgrounds or political or philosophical beliefs, there is often a tendency for one board member to characterize others to you, and even be critical of the behavior of others. Remember the lesson of the Disciples when asked "Who is the greatest among us?" You work for all of the trustees. It is normal that you should like some more than others, but they are all important to the success of your mission. Work especially hard on accepting those who offend or trouble you. Acceptance will work far better in accomplishing your mutual goals than falling into an adverse relationship with any board member.

- **Avoid being a board member's "best friend."**

As Harry Truman once said, "if you want a friend in Washington; buy a dog."

You may sincerely like some members of the board, and truly enjoy spending time with them. Let friendship wait until after one of you has left the position. Board members have the important job of protecting the public trust in the way that they see fit. If you make a board member your "best friend" you may end up getting fired by your buddy. Keep an invisible but real line between you and members of the board. Be generous, kind and accepting and above all honest with them, but avoid close friendship.

- **Don't take any member of the board for granted.**

First of all, most of them are likely to be brighter than you may believe, and they probably know many things

about dealing with people and organizations that you don't. Respect their knowledge and capabilities, and never assume that they "don't get it" even if the signs are seemingly apparent. It is not our job to judge them; it is our job to listen to them, and to help guide them to good decisions. I have found that every board member I have ever worked with had some unique skill set that I lacked. I try to use that to my benefit, and for the benefit of the organization. Take time and patience to listen to and watch for those unique skill sets.

- **The importance of regular communication with the board cannot be overstated.**

I use periodic updates, (I try to keep on a weekly schedule,) to share critical information. I never include more than four key issues, give some background and my current intentions regarding those key issues. I follow this up by spending personal time with each board member, one time per month since I have seven members. Be sensitive to the preferences of each member. Some like to share a meal while others might like to take a stroll. Some prefer to come to your office, while others prefer that you come to their office. Remember that they are the ones giving their time to help the organization succeed, and their preferences of how and when to meet should dictate your behavior. Ask them what they want to do, give them some choices and they will usually be happy to express their desires. If some board members are "hard to get" stay with it. It doesn't help to meet with a subset of the board and leave others out.

The relationship between a chancellor and the individual members of the board of trustees is always complex and challenging. Yet it is one of the most rewarding aspects of my job.



## Study uncovers the challenges, frustrations and joy of trusteeship

A recent doctoral study on the challenges of serving as a California community college trustee found board members frustrated at times with collective bargaining, implementation of policy, conducting board meetings and interpersonal relations with fellow trustees and administrators.

The findings were based on telephone interviews of 40 trustees from throughout the state, conducted by Luz Maria Ortega, a doctoral student at the University of La Verne. (She received her doctorate in March.) Ortega, a former student services coordinator at Gavilan College, is now Assistant Vice President for Student Affairs at CSU Monterey Bay.

The purpose of the study was to identify factors perceived as contributing to job satisfaction and dissatisfaction among trustees. The study also investigated how these factors could be enhanced or mitigated to increase job satisfaction. Sixty-percent of the 40 trustees interviewed were male, 60 percent had served from 4 to 9 years and 53 percent indicated they were not going to seek re-election or had not decided.

According to Ortega's findings, "trustees stated that a tremendous amount of energy was devoted (to collective bargaining) and that for the most part, the negotiation process operates on mistrust. Trustees perceived themselves to be caught in a bind between fairly distributing monetary resources to employee compensation and other competing district needs. Trustees perceived their district faculty unions as often not listening, understanding, or caring for other district needs as much as their own contracts.

Trustees also expressed frustration regarding policy implementation. One trustee interviewed complained, "Every person has an interpretation of policy and what that means." Legislative policies or mandates such as AB 1725, said another trustee, often "get abused by faculty, misused by administration or misunderstood by the board."

Board meetings are also a source of frustration for some trustees. "Trustees stated that conducting meetings was difficult because it required applying simultaneous skills in facilitating discussions, reaching decisions, delegating tasks, and often mediating conflict among board members." Ortega also found that relations between trustees and administrators were strained when trustees or presidents disagreed on "how to approach situations, problems, solutions, or conflict with personality differences." Some trustees expressed discontent whenever there was inconsistent and "lack of communication from the college president."

## Improving Trustee Job Satisfaction

Interviews with trustees uncovered these keys to trustee satisfaction:

- **Understanding the planning and budgeting process**
- **Involvement in promoting student access and retention**
- **Hiring a knowledgeable and competent president**
- **Knowledge of contract negotiations**
- **Ensuring faculty and college accountability to the public**
- **Embracing and keeping up with change (including technology)**
- **Improved board-to-board relations**
- **Productive and effective board meetings**
- **Positive communication with administrators and faculty**

# Study uncovers the challenges, frustrations and joy of trusteeship

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Trustees indicated to Ortega a deep sense of satisfaction from contributing to student success. "Trustees felt satisfied when current students or alumni told them stories of success or graduation experiences." Trustees also expressed a sense of satisfaction from being able to communicate with and problem solve with the president, faculty, staff, students and the community.

The most satisfying part of the job, according to this same group of trustees, related to the job itself and the related achievements. Trustees enjoyed contributing their skills, knowledge, and experiences to the board and district and representing the district at social and community functions. Selecting a college president was also identified as a highly satisfying part of the job in terms of fulfilling their job as representatives of the community and in selecting someone who can help promote and enhance the trustee role.

Keys to increasing job satisfaction, trustees reported, included improving their understanding of the planning and budgeting process, hiring knowledgeable and competent administrators and keeping informed of district matters, including negotiations with local bargaining units. Trustees felt "there is still a need to educate the board, administration, and faculty on negotiation processes and results that would be of mutual benefit to the district and the unions."

Trustees indicated that relations with fellow trustees could be im-

proved by "open and honest" communication and teamwork during board meetings. Ortega found that "adhering to an open and honest type of communication would create trust that would further improve ongoing trustee working relationships."

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