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Community College CEOs and Governing Boards

Experienced Guidance for Healthy and High-Functioning Working Relationships

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SOME OF THE MOST IMPORTANT professional relationships community college CEOs[1] will form are with the elected trustees who govern their campuses and districts. Yet, despite the critical nature of these relationships, few community college leaders ever receive formal preparation for navigating them or devote the requisite time to prepare for this significant function. Interactions can be complicated by politics, unexpected crises, and simple human nature. Mistakes and misunderstandings can be costly—not just to the individuals involved but to colleges and the students they serve.

This leadership practice brief aims to strengthen the relationships and communication between CEOs and trustees by building their understanding of their distinct and complementary roles. Our goal is to increase the efficacy of these partnered and interdependent leaders of some of the nation's most important public institutions.

The brief is organized into two sections:

- **Background and context** on key governance features in the California Community Colleges (CCC), which have some commonalities with community colleges nationwide
- **"The Big 10":** Practical recommendations for building and sustaining healthy relationships between CEOs and boards

Although this brief is intended primarily for sitting community college CEOs who report directly to elected boards, it may likewise serve as a useful tool for aspiring leaders considering a future presidency or chancellorship. It may also prove helpful for campus presidents in multi-college districts who seek to support their chancellors by deepening their understanding of the dynamics between trustees and board-reporting CEOs. Another goal of this brief is to provide insight to trustees as they build functioning, stable relationships with the CEOs they recruit, hire, and evaluate.

A Note About the Authors and Their Intent

This brief is written by CEOs for CEOs. It is intended to share the benefit of wisdom earned from experience, successes, and missteps. The authors' collective leadership experience spans more than 50 years across 12 colleges and districts in the CCC system, the nation's largest. The authors have served as president, superintendent/president, and chancellor in suburban and urban community college districts, reporting directly to elected boards of trustees for much of that time. All three authors have recently retired and now are active presenters and coaches for the Wheelhouse CEO Institute on Leadership and the Wheelhouse Advancing Leaders Institute. Although they gained their expertise in the context of California institutions, the lessons they learned can be generalized to community colleges nationwide. The authors believe that more effective working relationships will improve institutional outcomes, extend CEO and trustee longevity and impact, and provide needed organizational stability. They also aim to increase job satisfaction, trust, and morale—all essential elements for effectively leading and governing community colleges to deliver student success and equity.

Background and Context: The California Governance Landscape

IN CALIFORNIA, the CCC system is governed through 73 locally elected boards. These boards, which typically range in size from five to seven trustees, include a total of 438 elected officials.[2] California's model of locally elected governance underscores the state's commitment to community oversight and representation and is designed to balance democratic participation with efficient administration, local autonomy with systemwide coordination, and educational mission with fiscal responsibility.[3] At the state level, the CCC Board of Governors, appointed by the governor and confirmed by the state senate, "sets policy and provides guidance for the 73 local districts and 116 colleges that constitute the system."[4] Board members engage formally with state and federal officials as well as other state organizations, with the goal of advocating for and advancing the interests of the CCC system and its students.

Although locally elected trustees stand for office as individuals, they don't act individually or have the authority to make management decisions for the institutions they serve. The collective role of the board is primarily that of policymaker: The board sets broad directives and maintains oversight of the performance of the organization and CEO but does not initiate or direct daily operations. Board members' individual authority is limited and is vested in the board as a whole. Ingram's guidance from 1997 still holds true: "Trustees, as individuals, have no legal authority, nor are they entitled to special privileges. Rather, their authority and fiduciary responsibilities arise exclusively from their participation with others when a governing board officially is convened."[5]

The Community College League of California (CCLC), a statewide professional organization that educates and organizes trustees, notes the following:

> Trustees have authority only when they are meeting as a board. The board as a whole is the legal governing unit. Trustees contribute their collective talents, skills, and perspectives to their boards, but have no individual power. Individual trustees have no authority to direct any college staff, make no statements representing the board (unless they are reports of adopted board positions and policy), and support board decisions once they are made.[6]

As the sole employee of the board, the CEO is responsible for the daily operations of the institution, as Carver explains: "The CEO is accountable to the board as a body. ... For most official purposes, the board has only one employee, the CEO. The CEO has all the rest."[7]

The defined role, expectations, and responsibilities of the governing board are codified through the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC), the accrediting body for the state's community colleges. ACCJC's Standard IV: Governance and Decision-Making delineates governance roles, directing the governing board to give "the CEO full authority to implement board policies and ensure effective operations and fulfillment of the institutional mission."[8]

At the core of the CCC governance structure is the principle of participatory governance, mandated by the California Education Code[9] to feature meaningful consultation with faculty, staff, and students in institutional decision-making processes. This requirement reflects California's commitment to ensuring that institutional policy incorporates input from multiple constituencies. The model seeks to balance democratic participation with efficient administration and local autonomy with systemwide coordination.

Effective participatory governance requires productive contributions from many groups and individuals. But there is an important balance to be struck: CEOs and trustees risk hampering their effectiveness and that of the institution when these roles and responsibilities are not clearly delineated and consistently practiced by all involved. As Falls notes: “In order to sustain good leadership and good governance, the line between them must be adequately communicated, thoroughly understood, and well respected.”[10] Regardless of the college’s culture, mission, or location, effective governance and strong CEO–board relationships rely on certain overarching principles and clear communication.[11]

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A note of caution: CEOs and boards must be conscious not to overinterpret what is required by way of collegial consultation and thus inadvertently forfeit or dilute the authority they possess. As an example, the potential for overinterpretation can appear when translating components of the Academic Senate’s “10+1,”[12] especially when interpreting areas of purview outside curriculum and academic standards and professional matters. Campus culture and institutional norms can sometimes create an environment in which the CEO or board is overly influenced by vocal constituencies and past practices that can lead to excessive caution or inaction in decision-making. Board support for CEOs exercising their positional authority is critical in high-functioning institutions and in strengthening CEO–board relationships. CEOs and boards must be aligned in their understanding of the appropriate role of faculty and other constituency groups or risk a fracture in the relationship that can be difficult to mend.

Recent CEO Turnover in California and Nationally

Within a relatively short period, CCCs have experienced a significant number of vacancies in the CEO position. Current CEO tenure may be at an all-time low, with 25% (35) of 140 statewide CEOs in 2025 holding tenures of two years or fewer in their current seats and 42% (59) of CEOs at three years or fewer.[13] Two compelling reasons for the high turnover are the numerous voluntary and involuntary retirements and resignations, particularly during and just after the COVID-19 pandemic. The resultant vacancies created a cascade effect of new openings and movement across the system.

In 2024, the CCLC reported that the average tenure of a California community college CEO tenure was five years, with a median of four years.[14] These tenures in California are somewhat shorter than those reported for CEOs nationally by the American Council on Education.[15]

During the five-year window following the pandemic, most new CEOs in California were hired from within the CCC system, with only a handful of out-of-state administrators appointed, and none from the four-year segment. At the same time, the cadre of CEOs has diversified considerably by race/ethnicity, age, years of experience, gender, and sexual orientation. The greater (and necessary) diversification of the current California CEO cohort was also influenced by a higher number of doctoral degree completers—the de facto credential for CEOs—and a broader pipeline of interested, capable administrators in student services, instructional services, and other executive functions who were ready for the rigors of the presidency.

The Big 10: A Practical Guide to Building and Sustaining Healthy CEO–Trustee Relationships

THE CORE RESPONSIBILITY for any community college CEO—prospective, new, or experienced—is to establish, nurture, and maintain a positive relationship with the board to ensure a lengthy and effective tenure. The CEO works for the board, and for this partnership to succeed, clear roles and a focus on teamwork are essential. The CEO and board roles are symbiotic and complementary, their success tied together. Board support is most evident when both parties understand their unique partnership and carry out their complementary roles with mutual respect, trust, and open communication.[16] A CEO cannot be successful without a supportive board, and the board cannot be successful if its CEO fails to respond to board directives and organizational performance metrics.

What follows are "The Big 10": a set of recommendations that set the stage for an effective and prosperous CEO–board relationship. These steps are generally intended for the initial hiring process and the first year of the CEO-ship, but many can be incorporated throughout the presidency, especially as newly elected trustees join the board. It is never too late to improve a CEO's relationship with the board.

If CEO–board partnerships are to thrive and CEO tenures are to increase, CEOs must establish effective, functional, and personal relationships with their boards of trustees.

The trustees to whom CEOs report can make or break their tenure.

1

Lay the Groundwork: Due Diligence and First Steps

Research the Board

The trustees to whom CEOs report can make or break their tenure. Before deciding to apply, candidates should learn everything they can about the trustees, their relationships, and the track record of their actions as a board. All boards have their own history, culture, and skill set. More experienced CEOs will work directly with less experienced trustees to build their effectiveness and capacity to understand their roles of governing the district and shaping policy.

The board hires, evaluates, and gives direction (goals and expectations) to the CEO, its sole employee. The most effective boards also provide ongoing support to the CEO in carrying out those goals. Board research should include, at minimum, the following sources.

- **Website review:** Start with the college or district website, particularly the section devoted to board activities and trustee biographies, to get a snapshot of trustees' backgrounds and accomplishments.
- **Interviews:** Talk to people who know the board, including, if possible, the former CEO, while understanding that the circumstances of their departure may color their viewpoint.
- **Regional sources:** Speak with people who have a regional or statewide perspective and can describe the board's reputation and how they operate.
- **Public records:** Conduct an internet search to locate relevant news articles, podcasts, or other media, including social media such as Facebook, X, Instagram, and LinkedIn posts.
- **Board meetings:** Many districts record board meetings and make the recordings publicly available. Watching a sample of these meetings can provide insight into how trustees conduct business, relate to one another, and interact with constituents and the CEO.

Pay Attention to the Board Vote

Be aware of the board vote, especially a split vote (e.g., 4–3), when the board hires a CEO. Ideally, the vote should be unanimous, indicating that all trustees publicly support the selection. If a new CEO has only a simple majority in support, it takes just one board member changing their mind to flip the vote, creating a precarious position for the CEO.

> **EXAMPLE** Dr. Smith was one of four finalists for the superintendent/president position at a single, large college district. After holding public forums, the search consultant communicated that Dr. Smith was the top finalist, indicating that the board president would call him that night after the board concluded its special session. Neither the board president nor the consultant called that night. In fact, he didn't hear anything for two more days. He was greatly concerned about the lack of follow-up but was relieved when he finally got the call offering him the position, which he accepted. The board voted unanimously in public to approve his appointment.
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> After Dr. Smith began his new position, he learned that the delay in contacting him was caused by an unsubstantiated allegation made against him by one of the trustees. The substance of the allegation was a sealed envelope in his personnel file in his prior district. The implication was that he had done something wrong. Luckily for Dr. Smith, this allegation was proven false; the trustee who made the allegation wanted another candidate and sought to disqualify Dr. Smith. Although Dr. Smith was pleased that most of the board did not believe the allegation, he would have benefited from knowing these details prior to accepting the position.

Board support can be split even with a unanimous public vote, and it can be difficult to discern dissension when it is kept behind closed doors. Despite their opposition, some board members may vote for the leading candidate to create the appearance of a unanimous vote. Thus, CEOs may accept positions believing the entire board supports them when some members may harbor misgivings, be less than enthusiastic, or even potentially work to undermine the CEO. A secretly split vote can include the following signs:

- Delayed, extended, or overly lengthy board deliberations
- Multiple inquiries from the hiring consultant about specific incidents or issues
- Hesitancy or lack of clarity from the consultant concerning board deliberations
- Sudden changes to the board meeting schedule related to the CEO hiring

An accurate assessment of the true level of board support can be an important factor in the success or failure of the CEO and in any decision to take the job. This worry would be unnecessary if all boards followed Carver and Carver's one-voice principle:

> The responsible board adheres to a very strict rule that the authority of the board resides in the board as a body, not in members of the board. If you are on a nine-member board, you do not have one-ninth of the authority; you have none of it, while the board has all of it. We call this the one-voice principle, and not following it is a major reason for governance dysfunction. It requires the board, after sufficient debate, to reach a position that everyone may not have agreed with but that no one undermines.[17]

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There are many examples of CEOs whose tenures were derailed because they did not accurately assess the true level of trustee support from the outset. First-time CEOs should not be so eager to land the gig that they don't focus on the "tea leaves" or look beyond the basic terms of the contract (compensation and length) to discern the true level of trustee support.

Board membership can change with any election: Terms last four years, and elections are held every two years on a staggered basis. The board that initially hired the CEO may not be the same board with which that CEO negotiates a contract extension. Even one new board member can alter the entire dynamic. Ultimately, a good CEO needs to earn the trust and respect of the board and never assume they have it.

Negotiate a Contract That Meets Your Needs

The CEO employment contract is the first step in establishing a working relationship with the board and can define the parameters of CEO behavior and board expectations. There is no single standard for negotiation; each district negotiates independently. Some districts use a pro forma contract that provides little leeway for negotiation. Others may be more open to considering new items. Some districts will not allow a potential CEO to have a third party (such as legal counsel) negotiate their contract while others will.

Because of the honeymoon period—the usually positive glow when a new CEO is hired—the initial negotiation can be the best opportunity for the CEO to secure a contract that includes desired items, such as annual automatic salary increases based on positive performance evaluations, deferred compensation, cost-of-living adjustments, or specified resources for CEO leadership development. In other cases, first-time CEOs may need to accept a less-than-ideal contract to land their first presidency; the opportunity for salary and benefit improvements may be triggered by demonstrating excellent work and by the board increasing CEO compensation to retain the executive.

2

Work Consistently Toward Aligned Values and Expectations

A healthy and open relationship between the board and the CEO is essential to the well-being of the institution, the individuals involved, and the students they collectively serve. The foundation for this relationship is established even before a CEO is hired, specifically when the board details institutional values and board expectations in the CEO position description. It is also vital to ascertain whether the CEO's values are aligned with the stated values of the board—misalignment could signal a fatal flaw and an irreconcilable circumstance.

The institution's values must be defined from the start and reflected in the position description, which should clearly state trustees' expectations regarding the working relationship between the board and the CEO. If the board values civility, respect, and compassion, for example, these capacities should be explicitly called out, including examples of how the board itself models these behaviors.

Boards should require applicant CEOs to provide a statement detailing their own values and how they align with the values of the institution. Merely stating that one is a "transformational leader" isn't sufficient, there is no evidence of what that term means in practice. Specific, rich examples are necessary for the board to understand fully the candidate's definitions and to establish reasonable expectations during the application process. Far too often, boards and CEO applicants assume they share a universal understanding of terms such as *transformational*, only to discover that definitions and applications can vary widely.

Reporting to board members with multiple—at times, competing—interests, values, and perspectives on effective leadership can make the CEO position particularly challenging. When the board meets with CEO finalists, trustees must engage in honest conversation about what constitutes good and effective leadership. CEOs, in turn, have a responsibility—to themselves and the institution—to scrutinize and pressure-test the board-stated values and to examine whether they match their own values and priorities. This is a critical time for both parties to determine "fit."

A board's failure to establish clear expectations from the beginning can result in applicants who cannot demonstrate the values expected by the board or whose values may be misaligned to the institution. Failing to discuss what the board expects of the CEO and what the CEO expects of the board can lead to unspoken expectations, frustration, and disappointment, resulting in a breakdown in communication and rapport.

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Schick offers strong guidance on role definitions for both CEOs and boards, anchored by six principles for good CEO–board relations. Paraphrased here for brevity:

1. The board focuses on governance, not management.
2. The board has one employee: the CEO.
3. The CEO has only one employer: the board as a whole.
4. The board establishes committees to help accomplish its own job, not the CEO's.
5. The board evaluates the CEO through a designated committee.
6. The board conducts its own annual self-appraisal.[18]

3

Nurture the Relationship: Manage Communication, Understand Motivation, and Address Conflict

Get to Know One Another

To establish a positive and productive working relationship, CEOs need to know individual trustees. CEOs should learn about their personal backgrounds, family members, social and professional activities, likes, and dislikes, and in return, they should share information about themselves with trustees. Having a solid personal relationship with trustees enhances the CEO's presence at public and ceremonial events (foundation events, fundraising dinners, and political gatherings) because trustees can help build CEOs' networks and connections in the community, establishing beneficial partnerships for the district.

Understand Trustee Motivations

It is important to understand why the trustees became trustees and what personal goals they are pursuing in this role. Trustees may serve on a board for a variety of reasons, alone or in combination:

- Personal (e.g., being a former student)
- Social (e.g., wanting to give back to the community)
- Political (e.g., advocating for a specific program or constituent group or using the platform to advance to higher office)

No matter the reason why each trustee joins the board, CEOs benefit from understanding their motivation to help them reach their goals, assuming their goals pose no conflict of interest, conform to all laws and regulations, and are consistent with organizational goals.

It is not uncommon for people to seek election to a community college board as a springboard to higher office (city council, county supervisor, etc.). There is nothing inherently wrong with such aspirations. Part of the CEO's role is to provide board members with opportunities to be visible as elected officials and to fulfill ceremonial roles at the colleges or in the community. Note: These activities must not be tied to political campaigns, must not use college or district resources for the benefit of a sole individual (gift of public funds), and must be scrutinized to ensure no apparent or real conflicts of interest.

Other trustees will run for office on the platform that something in the institution needs fixing.

> **EXAMPLE** A multicollege district allocated general obligation bond funds based on facility prioritization (greatest need) rather than a prespecified percentage per college. The college receiving less funding perceived this as unfair. As a result, three people representing that viewpoint ran for and were elected to the board. When the CEO discovered this was a primary concern, he provided data demonstrating that the allocation was fair over the long run based on facility needs. The CEO was able to head off unnecessary conflict and misperceptions by addressing the new trustees' concern strategically.

It is not the duty of the CEO to make the allocation decision, but it is the duty of the CEO to provide as much information as possible for the board to make sound decisions. Knowing the interests of board members helps the CEO carry out that responsibility by providing relevant, strategic information that can temper interpersonal friction and defuse emotionally charged issues.

Manage Conflict and Disagreement

Despite best efforts—or by not paying attention to the early warning signs—relationships can go "sideways" when parties cannot agree on what constitutes good leadership, including differing expectations for the CEO, or when CEOs or board members are overly influenced by vocal trustees or constituent groups.

The board must decide in advance how it will communicate concerns with the CEO and what opportunities it will afford the CEO to address them. The CEO, in turn, must validate and address the board's concerns and speak to them honestly and in a timely fashion. The CEO is the custodian of public trust, the public's resources, and the educational lives of students. It is their responsibility to safeguard the district against unnecessary exposure that could raise legal, fiscal, reputational, or governance concerns. The CEO must also act to uphold the district's reputation, even if it means calling out, reprimanding, or firing popular employees who have acted inappropriately, using appropriate district policies and procedures.

4

Set the Tone and Develop the Board

While developing good rapport with individual board members is important, rapport with the board as a whole is equally so. One of the best strategies for a good start with the full board is to convene a retreat during the first few months after being hired.

Shape the First Board Retreat

When a new CEO's first board retreat is designed and executed with intention, it can be an effective vehicle for setting board expectations and goals for the CEO. Just as important, it is the perfect time to remind the board of its responsibilities and of acceptable behavior toward the CEO. When planning this first retreat, CEOs should pay special attention to the following aspects.

- **Skilled facilitation:** It is less than ideal for the CEO or a staff member to facilitate the retreat. As an outsider, an experienced facilitator will be better positioned to lead a frank discussion about the ethical, behavioral, and operational issues necessary to develop a good working relationship.

- **Role delineation:** This is the time to emphasize the distinct roles of the board and the CEO. A skilled facilitator will clearly outline these roles and give examples of how they should play out in practice. Failure to clarify such roles can lead to micromanagement and misunderstandings.
- **Consensus building:** Develop consensus about the current state of the organization, where the organization should aspire to move, and the best means of arriving at that desired future. This discussion must include the necessary resources and information needed going forward to assess progress through evaluative tools such as key performance indicators.
- **Documentation of outcomes:** A key deliverable for the retreat should be a summary document outlining the expected behavior of the CEO and the board. This document should also provide explicit direction to the CEO in terms of priorities for action and performance evaluation metrics.
- **Scheduling consistency:** Because achieving consensus may take time, follow-up retreats or meetings should be scheduled to ensure ongoing focus on essential conversations that can be overshadowed by the "day-to-day" if time is not set aside for them.

Create an Educational Plan for the Board

CEOs should not assume that the board fully understands its role and responsibilities as a governing body and as individual trustees. Human memory is enhanced by repetition, and boards handle vast amounts of information. CEOs should therefore regularly schedule training and opportunities to refresh the board's memory:

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- **Regular training:** CEOs should establish a regular schedule of training sessions and topics for board meetings and retreats. Annual topics may include board ethics, conflicts of interest, the Brown Act (California's law requiring that meetings of public bodies be conducted openly so that the public can observe and participate in government decision-making), and best practices in trusteeship. Occasional topics might cover collective bargaining principles, Assembly Bill 1725 (the 1988 legislation that mandated participatory governance in CCCs), community college governance, cybersecurity, new laws and regulations, and emerging topics where building board fluency will support good decision-making.
- **Conferences:** Encourage trustees to attend statewide and national conferences focused on governance. Professional development for the board is just as important as it is for the CEO. Provide information about these opportunities and facilitate attendance.

Establish Standards for Dialogue

Both the board and the CEO are responsible for establishing standards for dialogue, for sharing timely and consistent information, and for being mindful of tone of voice. These standards should include a commitment to strict confidentiality and the "no surprises" rule. When these standards are not established, jointly understood, or followed, interactions can become challenging or hostile; in some cases, they can lead to CEO termination.

Have a Formal Onboarding Process and Program for New Trustees

Board turnover is commonplace since new trustees are often elected in each cycle. CEOs should plan and execute a thorough onboarding process for new trustees to establish proper governance culture from the start. Formal onboarding provides context for trustees, including understanding of their fiduciary responsibilities, familiarity with the district's policies and procedures, and their role in supervising, supporting, and evaluating the CEO.

A thorough onboarding process should entail the following components.

- **CEO meeting:** New trustees meet with the CEO to discuss roles and current issues.
- **Legal counsel briefing:** New trustees meet with the district's legal counsel to review the legal, fiduciary, and ethical obligations and constraints of being a board member.
- **External professional development:** New trustees receive training through organizations such as the Association of Governing Boards (AGB), California Community College Trustees (CCCT), or Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT).

5

Establish and Maintain Trust

An overarching goal for a board-reporting CEO is to build and maintain trust. The foundation for that trust is best supported when the CEO provides informative, timely, and accurate information to the board. Providing incorrect or haphazard information rapidly erodes trust. The CEO's responsibility is to position the board for informed decision-making.

At times, just providing dependable information is not enough. It is incumbent upon the CEO to give explanations and insights that help the board understand broader implications, context, or politics. When this is done consistently, it builds trust and ensures that the board has the appropriate context to perform its duties.

Demonstrate Competency Through Follow-Up

Another trust builder is diligent follow-up after board meetings when questions or issues arise that need timely attention. CEOs and their teams must track these issues and regularly report back to the board on their status. Whether they are provided through formal processes or informal communication, consistent and thorough responses are essential and should be buttressed by internal and external expertise and input from legal counsel, when appropriate.

The Golden Rule: No Surprises

No one likes being blindsided, and boards are no different. An event or issue that catches the board by surprise can quickly break trust and jeopardize the CEO's position. The board should never be informed first by the media about significant issues regarding the college. Anticipating and communicating such issues is a skill learned over time, and the CEO must remain vigilant and assertive in keeping the board informed.

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> **EXAMPLE** A new CEO was hired at an urban community college that spanned serving a large geographic area, which included both suburban and rural communities. This mix of communities created a board that had differing loyalties and experiences relating to the area of the district they represented. A majority of the board members were longstanding trustees, with several having served on the board for more than 20 years. As a result, they developed deep relationships with college faculty and staff, which meant that the trustees each had their own trusted sources of information relating to college business. There is nothing inherently wrong with this dynamic, but in this case, it led to the new CEO being regularly challenged or contradicted by trustees based on alternative information that the CEO knew to be incorrect.
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> The new CEO knew she couldn't change this situation overnight. However, she patiently presented the board with the correct information, mainly via a comprehensive weekly memo she sent to the board and by continuing to develop stronger relationships with the trustees. It took many memos, conversations, and accomplishments, but the CEO felt she had finally won the trust of the board during her second year at the college. She ended up having a long and successful tenure there.

Internal surveys of boards and staff frequently reveal that communication is a top area of concern. The successful CEO develops multiple mechanisms for communicating with trustees.

- **Individual communication:** This can include regular one-on-ones, coffee meetings, shared meals, emails, text messages, Zoom meetings, or phone calls.
- **Small group meetings:** These can be effective and efficient, but California CEOs must be mindful of the Brown Act threshold for the number of trustees allowed to meet outside a publicly noticed, formal setting.
- **Weekly memos:** The memo should summarize current activities and foreshadow upcoming issues. Although weekly memos are no longer truly confidential due to public records requests, they remain a standard practice with benefits beyond conveying information—they help the CEO stay focused on vital issues and provide a clear record of communication, demonstrating accountability and follow-through.
- **Emergency contact:** Use memos, phone calls, or texts when urgent issues arise.

If information that is truly confidential needs to be shared, the best method is direct communication (a phone call or face-to-face meeting). The need to share confidential communication often stems from potential legal proceedings and other sensitive topics, such as personnel issues and collective bargaining developments. For written documentation, the safest methods involve leveraging attorney–client privilege by having the board's legal counsel write any necessary documentation.

The Silver Rule: Don't Tell Tales Out of School

Gossip is pervasive on college campuses, as in most places of work. The CEO's duty is to set a professional tone that discourages it. Engaging in gossip, especially concerning trustees, is a major error and one of the quickest ways to lose trust, lose confidence, or worse, lose your job. Maintaining confidentiality of private details shared by trustees is critical. Sharing such information is a violation of privacy.

A good rule of thumb for any CEO is to not talk about trustees with other trustees unless the matter concerns specific board functionality or business. Getting caught in the middle of personal conflicts or appearing to favor one board member or faction puts the CEO in a no-win position. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, never criticize trustees in public. If you hold a negative opinion of a trustee, keep it to yourself.

6

Manage Micromanagement and Overreach

We focus on role clarity for good reason. Trustees have a variety of motivations for micromanaging their CEOs. Some are "doers" who have attained success in careers that required their direct management of daily operations. This is the sphere they know, and they may find it difficult to curb their natural tendencies to intervene directly with staff if they perceive a deficiency. Others can become understandably concerned about institutional risk and liability, which can tempt them to overinvolve themselves in operations. Still others can be responding—perhaps overresponding—to crises such as accreditation sanctions, conflicts over participatory governance, or safety concerns.

When a trustee steps outside their role, the CEO should not overreact. Three steps are required. First, inform the chair of the problem. Together, fashion an appropriate and effective response, which may involve the chair addressing the trustee individually. If the problem involves the board chair or multiple members, it may necessitate further board training facilitated by legal counsel or an outside agency, such as the CCLC or like entities in other states. This is an appropriate topic for a board retreat, where the issue can be addressed with a professional facilitator without singling out individual behavior.

Leaving Well: Notes on Terminating the Contract

When a CEO is not a good fit for the institution or board, parting ways is necessary. Ideally, even termination can be approached with compassion. The goal should never be to surprise or humiliate the CEO, as this is damaging not only to the individual but to the entire organization, including reputational harm to the board with the community, the press, and future CEOs. If there is no clear reason for the termination, the action may be as much a referendum on the board as on the CEO. It could indicate that the board failed to attend to the hard work of coaching, cultivating, supporting, and evaluating the CEO. Boards, like CEOs, are responsible for doing the "heavy lift" in the organization, especially when it applies to their sole employee.

If the CEO is surprised by this action, it is likely that thorough and timely evaluations were not conducted, that there was a lack of honesty in communication between the board and the CEO, or that a respectful and trusting relationship was never established. When a board is moving toward termination, at least one board member should be asking, "Why, and what corrective actions have been taken?" Unless it is with cause, per the contract, termination should be a last resort, not a matter of convenience or expediency for the board.

Most CEO contracts have a "termination without cause" component whereby a board can pay out the remaining contract after termination. California law limits CEO pay in the event of termination to a maximum of 18 months, even if the contract extends longer. CEOs can negotiate for additional considerations.

When establishing and sustaining an effective relationship between the CEO and board, an old adage is helpful: "The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing." Translation: stay focused and pay attention to your most important goals and organizational priorities, free from distractions, interesting side attractions, and unnecessary time-sucking activities.

An unintended but certain consequence of a swift CEO termination is a state of fear, anxiety, and instability within the organization. This is one circumstance where compassionate leadership—on the part of the CEO and the trustees—plays an important role in maintaining healthy relationships and organizations, even during the most difficult circumstances.

7

Build CEO–Board Unity

It is vital to send the message that board work is teamwork and that authority is vested in the full board rather than in individual trustees. While the CEO has no control over who runs or is elected to the board of trustees, an effective onboarding and ongoing professional development structure is critical for developing a functional, informed board.

Understand the Importance of CEO–Board Chair Unity and Board Self-Governance

A good working relationship between the CEO and the board chair is the hallmark of an effective governance process. The CEO should develop a close working relationship with the chair, who is the designated leader of the board (usually through internal election or, in some states, by government appointment).

The most effective boards self-govern, and the board chair is critical to ensuring this happens. To do so, the board chair should do the following:

- **Monitor behavior:** A strong chair monitors board behavior, a function that is awkward for CEOs to perform because of their status as employees.
- **Act as a nexus of authority:** The relationship between the CEO and the board chair is the nexus where board policy governance meets executive leadership. The chair should ensure that the board follows its own policies, that individual members behave ethically, and that authority is properly delegated to the CEO.
- **Provide operational clarity:** All operational and management decisions are under the authority of the CEO, though they must align with the policy directives and goals of the board.
- **Give feedback:** The board chair is instrumental in holding the CEO accountable for organizational performance and providing performance feedback. Regular meetings between the CEO and board chair are crucial, not only for setting the agenda but also for discussing important issues and determining what information is vital for the full board to review.

Operationalize the Board Policy Function

The board is responsible for setting the broad policy direction of the organization (mission, vision, and aspirational goals). The CEO should support the board in performing this fundamental function by implementing a process of policy review and revision.

- **Review cycle:** All board policies should ideally be reviewed in a multiyear cycle that coincides with the college accreditation cycle.
- **Informed governance:** By implementing a thoughtful review process, the board receives information regularly, becomes more familiar with policies, and understands their legal, ethical, operational, and behavioral implications.

Manage Bad Behavior

One of the thorniest and most dangerous issues CEOs face is when board behavior becomes problematic. As noted by O'Banion in describing rogue trustee behavior, many challenges can arise.[19]

> **EXAMPLE** The CEO of a suburban community college began to suspect that confidential information was being leaked out of closed session, which is a violation of board policy and ethical behavior for trustees. This situation became problematic, especially concerning collective bargaining issues and personnel actions. It made the CEO reluctant to bring certain items to closed session for fear of their being made public after the meeting. It was an untenable situation, and the CEO and board president initiated an investigation into the source of the leak, which was traced back to one trustee. Apparently, one of her best friends had been disciplined and terminated by the college, and she was defiantly acting out of anger as a result. The board publicly censured the trustee.

When a trustee or trustees exhibit inappropriate behavior that affects the functioning of the board, the CEO should understand the proper response and how to facilitate the appropriate action to correct the situation, although it most likely is not the CEO who carries out such action. The following strategies outline how a CEO should respond when confronted with inappropriate behavior by a trustee:

- **Know the CEO's role:** It is not the job of the CEO to "police" or correct the board, but the CEO should set an example and carry influence. The CEO has a duty and responsibility to act if they have knowledge that an individual trustee or a board is clearly engaged in unethical or illegal behavior (e.g., embezzlement, "pay to play," or false claims for reimbursement). Otherwise, the CEO becomes complicit.
- **Take action:** If the CEO has evidence of such behavior, action may involve informing the board chair and/or turning the information over to legal authorities (e.g., the district attorney, grand jury, or California Fair Political Practices Commission).
- **Obtain outside assistance:** If the problem persists and the board chair is ineffective, the CEO must call in outside assistance. This could be board legal counsel (with caution, as their contract is with the board), the state Chancellor's Office, CCLC, CCCT, ACCT, AGB, or private firms. Some situations have even resulted in grand jury and district attorney involvement. Again, the first recourse is usually to address the issue broadly during a board retreat, which is often the most appropriate solution.

Protection of Public Persona

The CEO's public persona can influence the relationship with the board over time, positively or negatively. With the ever-present and expanding capabilities of technology, including pervasive use of social media platforms and artificial intelligence, CEOs should be mindful of how their image "shows up" on both professional and personal accounts and platforms. To safeguard their reputations, CEOs should take the approach that *nothing* is private. The speed at which news and images travel on the internet supersedes the ability to control it. While the authors support CEOs in expressing their true and authentic selves, not all CCC districts and boards are the same; some lean liberal on certain issues, and others are very conservative. Some boards expect, or at least tolerate, a CEO who has a vivid and engaged social media presence, but others may view it as a liability to the organization.

8

Understand and Implement Compassionate Leadership

Compassionate leadership is defined by Gilbert and Choden as "a sensitivity to suffering in self and others with a commitment to try to alleviate and prevent it, highlighting the important motivational dimensions of compassion" (p. 221).[20] West further notes that compassionate leadership "involves a focus on relationships through careful listening to, understanding, empathizing with and supporting other people, enabling those we lead to feel valued, respected, and cared for, so they can reach their potential and do their best work."[21] Research indicates that compassionate leadership contributes to healthy organizations and reduces stress for both leaders and those who are being led.

In the CEO–board relationship, demonstrating compassionate leadership starts with mutual respect for the distinct but complementary roles played by each and a commitment to try to resolve potential performance issues or conflicts informally first and, if that is not sufficient, to engage in due process for corrective action that is legally compliant and respects the rights of individuals and the integrity of the institution. If all remedies have been exhausted without resolution, compassionate leadership can be further demonstrated by allowing the CEO to exit gracefully, "saving face" and reputation and sustaining integrity without unnecessary public drama. Importantly, this display of compassion can have the added benefit of establishing and memorializing a healthy campus culture exhibited through organizational leadership that can be attractive to future senior-level candidates, including CEOs.

Compassionate leaders understand that when an organization is built on rapport and relationships, there is a mutual agreement to reduce stress for oneself and others. These leaders begin relationships with the understanding that rapport is the currency used to accomplish organizational goals.

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By contrast, authoritative or positional leadership does not require compassion; it relies on the power and authority conferred by the position. Compassionate leadership does not mean abdicating leadership duties, nor does it mean that decisions are made based on how others feel. Rather, it is a commitment to get work done and carry out leadership duties with a sensitivity to the stress and challenges associated with this important work.

9

Make It Fun: Cultivating Social Interaction

Social interaction with the board is essential for building stronger ties and a greater sense of team spirit and unity. It is in the CEO's best interest to cultivate regular and appropriate social interaction with trustees. Interacting with the board in this way allows trustees to see the CEO outside their strict management role and humanizes both the role and the person filling it. Here are some simple strategies to build rapport:

- **Milestone celebrations:** Recognize trustee birthdays (e.g., sharing a cake before a board meeting) and other milestones.
- **Holiday events:** Hold a holiday party that can expose the board to exemplary college programs (e.g., drama or choral performances).
- **Program tours:** Arrange special tours for the board to visit signature programs and learn about the good work happening on campus.
- **Community engagement:** Attend community activities together, engage in "friend raising" visits with local legislators, or meet with charitable organizations to explore partnerships.

"Trucha" and Paying Attention to Early Warning Signs

In Chicano vernacular, *trucha* refers to a state of hypervigilance, the act of "keeping your head on a swivel." So, CEOs: *trucha*. Pay attention to ripples in the water, large and small. Early warning signs include:

- Trustees ignoring the CEO's advice or seeking the counsel of others
- Abrogating the "no surprises" rule, with trustee actions sprung on the CEO
- Allowing public criticism of the CEO to go unanswered during board meetings
- Leaking confidential or sensitive information
- Accelerating the scheduled CEO evaluation period
- Delayed responses to CEO calls, texts, or emails
- A drop in energy or engagement by board members during meetings

CEOs should never assume a level of security or safety with the board, the faculty senate, or any particular constituency. The board's orientation toward a CEO, for example, cannot be assumed to be predetermined by a shared racial, gender, ethnic, or cultural identity or any other affinity or affiliation. In some cases, majority "minority" boards have summarily ousted CEOs of color without warning or due process. If a board decides it does not like or trust the CEO, the CEO is left with little recourse, even when the board does not state a reason for termination, except within narrow legal circumstances. This can happen despite a recently renewed contract, a positive evaluation, or no evaluation at all.

If the warning signs do not dissipate and tension mounts, the CEO should immediately approach the board to plan for a graceful, "no drama" exit, if possible. Don't wait: Inaction or hesitancy can spur board action to expedite a nonrenewal or other move to oust the CEO. If there is a departure deal to be made with the board, addressing it sooner rather than later is optimal. In these real circumstances, maintaining your personal integrity and professional reputation are keys to a successful transition.

10

Seek Ongoing Opportunities for Professional Development

The CEO's job has become increasingly complex, requiring a broad skill set and a network of supportive mentors and peers. The traditional course of professional development (conference attendance and workshops) is unlikely to maximize the CEO's leadership development.

Because the success of the board is tied to the success of the CEO, boards must invest in their CEO's development through the following.

- **Professional coaching:** CEOs should advocate for this kind of support during contract and evaluation discussions. Corporate boards regularly invest in professional coaches for their CEOs, understanding the value of an experienced hand for guidance and consultation.[22]
- **Structured time for leadership learning, network development, and renewal:** Given the rigors of the role, CEOs need intentional professional development, opportunities to grow their leadership practice, and venues where they can learn from, connect to, and problem solve with peer leaders. At their institutions, CEOs are a peer group of one. The benefits—both concrete and psychological—of being in a learning community with other CEOs who share their challenges can be profound.
- **Sabbaticals:** Some boards and CEOs recognize that long-tenured CEOs could benefit from occasional time off to recharge. CEO contracts may include a sabbatical (summer, semester, or full year) as a reward for outstanding performance and longevity. The sabbatical should have a learning focus that allows the CEO to pursue a new skill or activity relevant to their position, bringing value back to the organization.

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Parting Thoughts

If we were to add one final recommendation for an effective and prosperous CEO–board relationship, it would be to focus on seeking work–life balance or harmony in the job as CEO. In our work coaching CEOs, they invariably identify self-care as an area that needs improvement. Simply put, the "better" you are, the better you can be for your family and institution. The CEO job is high profile, high stakes, and high intensity. It can be all-consuming because these jobs never "end." Careful and honest monitoring of self is a must for long-term health, prosperity, and longevity. We recommend that CEOs view well-being as nonnegotiable—a priority that is reflected in trustee interaction, in CEO behavior, and in the contract itself.

In this brief, we have tried to build an understanding of the distinct and interdependent roles of the CEO and board of trustees while providing practical advice and recommendations for strengthening communication, which can lead to more effective working relationships. These relationships can in turn fuel improved institutional outcomes, extend CEO tenure, and provide substantial organizational stability.

Community colleges will play even more significant roles in providing economic and social mobility to a rapidly changing populace in California and nationally. When community colleges are well led by a CEO–board partnership, they represent both hope and a genuine opportunity to enter the increasingly elusive American middle class through accessible, affordable education.

The CEO position is complex, demanding, and high stakes; it is well worth doing and doing well. Despite its inherent challenges, the CEO role and its impact can be extremely gratifying—just ask any successful CEO, and you will hear accounts of the joys of commencement and tales of how a student's and family's trajectory was dramatically changed in a single generation.

This is not just work; it is a calling that can be incredibly rewarding and satisfying in its service to students and community. Part of that satisfaction lies in carefully tended partnerships with elected trustees. For both CEOs and trustees, effective community college leadership comprises a collection of affirmative and selfless acts of courage, strategy, expertise, empathy, humility, service, empowerment, and love for our students and the communities they are proud to serve.

Endnotes

[1] In California, *CEO* is an umbrella term that refers to three types of institutional leaders: community college presidents, who lead colleges in multicollege districts and report to district chancellors; superintendent/presidents, who lead single-college districts and report directly to elected boards; and chancellors, who lead multicollege districts and report directly to elected boards.

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