Shared Governance Works in Executive Hiring, If We Let It

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Image: Brian Taylor

By Dennis M. Barden

Consider the following two scenarios: **Scenario No. 1**: Having sat through the entirety of a search committee's deliberations, a trustee on the panel seeks to invalidate its work — accusing two other committee members of having a conflict of interest because they are colleagues of an internal candidate who has become one of the two finalists. Those relationships had been discussed openly within the committee but conveyed to the full governing board only after the finalists had been named. The mere accusation compels the board to reject the finalist pool and restart the search from the beginning. The result: considerable disruption and delay, not to mention the damage done to the institution's reputation in the hiring market.

Scenario No. 2: A search committee chooses four finalists for a senior academic position. Before the final interviews, some faculty members learn that a candidate from their professional circle has not been chosen as a finalist. Multiple members of the faculty threaten to make their displeasure publicly known by disrupting the interviews. When informed about the possibility of protests, the finalists all withdraw, and the favorite of those dissenting faculty members is given the job.

If you're wondering whether either of those actually happened, the answer is yes. Both did. Unfortunately, such scenarios seem increasingly commonplace today in the hiring of presidents, provosts, and other senior administrators.

Both scenarios represent a breakdown of shared governance: A key constituency has overstepped its role and undermined a widely embraced social contract. In both, the hard work of an officially sanctioned search committee was disrespected and disregarded. And in both the institution did not have the opportunity even to evaluate the abilities and potential of the final candidates.

Assuming we all agree (a big assumption, I know, in these days of division and derision) that a search committee is empowered to act on behalf of all of an institution's constituents, either of those scenarios is pretty shocking.

Seldom do my fellow search consultants and I support a search in which there isn't some person or constituency unhappy with the composition of the hiring committee. However, it is even rarer for a committee's work to be summarily discarded by one or more of those constituencies.

Search committees are usually constructed to enfranchise all of the campus groups with a central stake in the hiring decision. Virtually every committee that I have served has worked hard to accommodate the diversity of voices and perspectives on the campus. People on a campus have a social contract with the search committee, assuming that it will perform its work on behalf of the whole as well as the many parts.

As I noted in a column this spring ("Candidacies Killed by a Typo"), faculty members and trustees approach the executive-hiring process from vastly different perspectives. Professors are accustomed to hiring someone who does what they do — i.e., scholarship and teaching — in a buyers' market. Particularly at the assistant-professor level, this is not so much search as it is selection, and search committees have the dual luxuries of superior knowledge of the job responsibilities on the one hand and a robust candidate pool on the other.

Trustees are generally well accustomed to hiring executive leadership, but they almost never have a frame of reference on building consensus around a hire, particularly from such a diverse group of constituencies, all of which have a significant stake in the outcome.

"Trust the process" is a mantra for me and my fellow search consultants. It is easier said than done.

H. Thomas Watkins — a former pharmaceutical executive, alumnus, and board member who chaired the presidential search committee at the College of William & Mary in 2017 — is, in many ways, typical of the trustees who lead such efforts. "I had not served on the search committee the last time the university looked for a president, so when this process was explained to me, I really thought it was crazy," he recalled. "The businesses that I have served in various capacities hire senior executives all the time, and I can tell you that it doesn't take a committee of 20 and six months of discussion and deliberation. I really couldn't believe that it would work.

"I kept on hearing, 'Trust the process. Trust the process,' but the whole thing just took so long. Decisions that we make in business in a matter of hours or even minutes literally took weeks. Every decision the committee made, and every action we took, received the deepest scrutiny. So I trusted the process. I sat still and listened to the lengthy discussions. I learned to anticipate how the different constituencies in the room were relating to the candidates."

As the search progressed, Watkins said, "Opinions and attitudes shifted, coalitions changed, and constituent groups expressed opinions not as blocs but as individual contributors to the whole. As the candidate pool narrowed, consensus started to build. By the time our board elected our next president, she had the support of all the constituencies in the room. We didn't have to come up with a strategy to build buy-in for our choice; it was built during the search process. Most important, the university community could trust in the outcome because the process had been robust and everyone involved performed according to their charge."

And that is how things work when the shared-governance environment has integrity and is honored by all concerned.

That doesn't always happen, unfortunately. It didn't happen in the scenarios noted above. In one case a trustee and in the other a faction of the faculty did not respect the integrity of the shared-governance environment as it applies to search committees. As the old saying goes, they took the law into their own hands. As with most examples of vigilante justice, the outcome was compromised, at least in the short term and with at least some of those institutions' key constituencies.

Shared governance is hard under the best of circumstances. If we agree it's the optimal way for colleges and universities to be run, however, it is during these dangerous times that shared governance must be most actively defended and most vigorously exercised.

In the context of executive search, communication — and in particular the open sharing of opinions and ideas — is absolutely critical. When search-committee members trust one another, listen to alternate views, and use their input productively, better hiring decisions are made. More important, the outcome of such a search has credibility and support.

Even in these challenging times — perhaps especially now — our institutions are best served when all key parties work hard to enfranchise one another in governance. Ray Kroc, who built McDonald's into one of the world's most recognizable brands, famously opined that "None of us is as good as all of us." Even notwithstanding the self-confidence of trustees, faculty members, students, administrators, alumni, and all the other sectors that have a stake in our colleges and universities, that statement proves itself true in every search that we do.

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