

To Spark Real Innovation, Trustees and Presidents Need to Start Mixing it Up

chroniclevitae.com/news/2272-to-spark-real-innovation-trustees-and-presidents-need-to-start-mixing-it-up



Photo by Diego PH on Unsplash

By Lucy A. Leske

I was reading [an old issue](#) of the Harvard Business Review when I came upon a passage that sounded awfully familiar: "Boards, once the dependably cautious voices urging management to mitigate risk, are increasingly calling for breakthrough innovation in the scramble for competitive advantage." That observation — made about the corporate world in 2017 — could just as easily be describing higher education today.

Across academe, the calls for innovative, "transformative" leadership have grown louder as the financial, political, and demographic waters have gotten choppy. In the recruiting process, trustees say they want a president with the creativity and conviction to do what it takes for the institution to survive. But once hired and on the job, are trustees *really* willing to support a "transformative" president?

Too often the answer is no. As an executive-search consultant in higher education, I often see a governing board's initial celebration of innovation give way to an inherent aversion to risk and a failure of nerve. The new president tries to deliver on the change for which he or

she was recruited, and the board slows the engines, reverses course, and/or fires the messenger.

What can be done to help both trustees and presidents understand how to be truly innovative — at a time when market position for every institution is more at risk than ever?

Perhaps a little engineered conflict between them is in order — also known as "creative abrasion," said Linda Hill, a professor of business administration at Harvard Business School, who has spent her career studying innovative leadership. Across all labor sectors, she argues, successful innovative leaders share a key trait, and it's not vision, strategy, or inspiration. It's the ability to enable talented people to "co-create."

Or, as Hill put it in [a recent TED talk](#): "Innovation is not about solo genius; it is about collective genius."

Within a company, creative abrasion thrives when the board and the CEO share a mind-set that encourages risk and lives with failure. Together they "develop a marketplace of ideas not from a single flash of insight but from a series of sparks generated through rigorous discourse and debate," wrote Hill and George Davis in the [HBR article](#) I referenced earlier.

Can creative abrasion work in higher education? Can trustees and presidents forge a mutually candid partnership in which openly challenging one another's views is accepted as healthy and productive?

Some institutions already do. But at many others, that would require a change in campus-governing culture. Presidents and trustees struggle with innovation for a variety of reasons:

- Trustees who accept the price of innovation in their own companies are less willing to risk failure with the fate of a college or university.
- A focus on short-term, familiar (yet often outdated) strategies gets in the way of pursuing long-term, breakthrough (yet often untested) initiatives.
- With heavy emphasis on metrics, both sides may not give themselves the time, intellectual space, or environment to ask tough questions.
- Some trustees find it uncomfortable to disagree with, or challenge, the administration. They serve on a board because they love the institution, not because they want to fight with it.
- Management doesn't like conflict with trustees, either.

When 'Half-baked' Is OK

My fellow search consultants and I have sat through dozens, even hundreds, of board and search-committee meetings where people ask us to find candidates with vision (and the ability to execute it) and entrepreneurial spirit (and the ability to manage — i.e., eliminate —

conflict while leading change). Yet when the new leaders take office and start doing what they were hired to do, their changes either scare people or fall short.

Hill's premise is that leaders must create space for innovation to play out, however uncomfortable that might be. In speaking with her about how her research might apply to academe, she noted similarities between the corporate and academic sectors. Boards in both realms are inherently nervous about risk, and uneasy in talking about it. The fault line," she said, "is always how much risk we should be taking." On the management side, leadership across sectors tends to be either too controlling — that is, not allowing room for unscripted conversations — or not bold or decisive enough in allowing those conversations to take place.

Hill and I have seen these uncertainties play out firsthand at board meetings in both sectors. It is not unusual for leadership teams to present a bold plan at a board strategy session, only to have board members challenging the plan so much about its uncertainties and risks that the opportunity for creative thinking is lost. The lesson there for boards: Don't punish the administrative team for half-baked ideas; instead, allow room for alternative thinking to emerge.

For both sides to get the full value of each other's contributions, Hill's research suggests, trustees should not be passive recipients of a major administrative plan, but rather, engaged, flexible partners *throughout*. Both leaders and trustees need to know that a challenging conversation — not an immediate answer, solution, or plan — is the objective of a meeting. Through creative abrasion, new ideas surface that can then be shared more widely, tested, and then either discarded or pursued.

Many college presidents already know that rubber-stamp relationships with a governing board are outmoded.

"Once upon a time, a good meeting from the perspective of board chair and president meant everything ran smoothly, there was no discussion, decisions were made ahead of time, and nothing was challenged," said Catharine (Cappy) Bond Hill, the managing director of the educational nonprofit Ithaka S+R and former president of Vassar College (and no relation to Linda Hill). "That has changed. Board members feel obliged to be more informed and engaged, and presidents need to recognize that."

Linda Hill says presidents should encourage trustees to push back. Higher-education boards are made up of people from industry, so it is no surprise that we are hearing more and more from search committees that they want presidents who can innovate. That means search consultants and hiring committees need to get better at isolating the trait — but it also means that boards must better tolerate the leader's missteps on the path to innovation.

The Need for Abrasion: What Presidents Say

I asked current and former presidents of a broad range of institutions about the concept of creative abrasion and its value to academe. I wanted to know whether, and how, these presidents were able to debate constructively with their governing boards. They all agreed that creative abrasion needed to happen more often in higher education.

"Presidents are at their best when the board of trustees understands how to be a thought partner," said Janet Steinmayer, the president of Lesley University, former president of Mitchell College, and a board member herself of Bryn Mawr College. As a president, she said she has tried to cultivate creative abrasion by being open to board members who question the status quo. Presidents, she said, need to be confident and comfortable in instructing their board to "ask questions — like, 'Do you have a plan for developing that?' — and push our thinking."

Steven Poskanzer, the president of Carleton College, agreed that innovation requires the leader and the board to challenge one another: "Boards can insist or urge folks to do things by posing hard questions. Their best role is as the friendly, devoted asker of hard questions."

How? One technique, Linda Hill said, was for the president to set aside specific time on the board agenda purely for processing ideas: "One meeting for talking, then one meeting for decisions, with soak time in between." In her research on innovation, she's found that people don't want to follow you to the future; they want to create it with you. "Building a board that is going to help you co-create leads to a difference in mind-set," she said. "It's not that you don't have a vision; it's that co-creation gets you to a much better place."

Getting Trustees to Accept the 'Co-Creator' Role

Trustees who know the value of creative abrasion in the corporate sector often get cold feet when a newly hired leader's "transformative" ideas are unpopular and/or controversial. Getting trustees to tolerate risky innovation in a higher-education setting may require a lot of one-on-one conversations. One public university president said it took him a few years to get his board comfortable with trying seven things knowing that only two or three will work.

It's critical to define the roles of various participants in a creative process, said Philip Glotzbach, the president of Skidmore College. "These days, my board appreciates my coming to them with ideas that are not fully baked," he said. "They want to be more involved in strategic planning. They want to be engaged earlier in the process about ideas. The key is to have a great leadership team and to make it clear to the board who owns the problem."

In short, it's essential to have a shared discussion of which questions, problems, or issues to tackle — but there also must be clear agreement on what management does, what trustees do, what faculty members do. At Carleton, Poskanzer said, "We found that, by putting

trustees, faculty, staff, and students together to answer questions, we got really good answers. There was more legitimacy because people were part of a process."

Competition, economic pressures, and heightened media attention all raise the level of board anxiety, so the tendency might be for a president to try to soothe, calm, and stay the course when, in fact, disruption and creative abrasion are exactly what is needed these days. Poskanzer recommends that approach but advises presidents not to raise too many "open-ended, panic-inducing questions" at once.

Be patient with the board, said Ralph Kuncl, the president of the University of Redlands. "Many trustees are naturally risk-averse," he said. "Boards are more prone to ask for a strategic plan and check all the boxes than they are to accept a proposal that might lead to failure. Slowly over time, our team has been reversing direction by connecting trustees more closely with the administrative leaders, talking about ideas as edgy as mergers and acquisitions or new schools, and using task forces of both trustees and executives to launch new initiatives. They were skeptical at first about the idea of an unexpected acquisition of a graduate institution, but now they are intrigued and excited. They are still risk-averse, but at least they are highly informed."

These conversations don't mean your institution will pursue *every* idea raised. They do mean that the trustees will start to be more comfortable talking about the college taking risks.

Of course it is possible for a president to push a board too far. There are plenty of examples of ex-presidents forced out because they got on the wrong side of the trustees, generated too much conflict, or created a divisive culture on the campus. Boards "need to be assured that the president is doing what was agreed upon and the strategy is well thought out," said Glotzbach, Skidmore's president.

You as president must carefully plot the pace and quantity of challenging conversations — choosing what to do and what not to do. Allow the trustees to catch up and hear evidence that the risks you took are paying off and the problems that emerged are being fixed.

How to Find Presidents with an Aptitude for Creative Abrasion

Hiring a new president is an inherently risky exercise. Whether that person's predecessor was perceived as a success, a failure, or a meh, trustees tend to be nervous about any switch in direction. The fallback position is the devil they know. "All search committees look for a diverse pool," said Wendy Libby, the president of Stetson University, "but when it comes time to select, they usually pick someone who resembles what they are used to. Boards are inherently concerned about change and conflict."

So adding a new criteria to the search — the candidate's skill at creative abrasion — will make some trustees nervous. Is that sort of relationship what they really want? It may seem like a trek into the enchanted forest: scary, unpredictable, and as likely to end in the swamp

as at the hidden castle.

Yes, creative abrasion will certainly lead to difficult conversations about unusual ideas. But solutions to higher education's greatest challenges today may only be found within the difficult and the unusual.

So how do we find leadership candidates who can foster creative abrasion on a college campus? What are the implications of that for the kinds of presidents we should be recruiting?

Presidential-search committees need to develop a new list of selection criteria, emphasizing traits like agility, curiosity, patience, self-awareness, and courage. It might include skills and competencies such as the ability to build trust, accept and learn from failure, move challenging conversations forward, extract new ideas from disagreement, and admit mistakes.

Sadly, it is more common in presidential searches to focus on whether candidates have experience with strategic planning, fund raising, or program development. Search committees, boards, and consultants look for evidence of accomplishment so we can be assured that we are picking someone who will perform in the future as they have in the past.

Rather than ask whether the candidate can "manage" conflict — a euphemism for making it go away — members of the search committee might want to start asking whether the leader has the capacity to mix it up and "channel" abrasion and conflict into better ideas or approaches. Some interview questions that would get at that:

- Describe a situation where you brought together a variety of people who think and act in potentially conflicting ways. What was the result?
- Have you had to adapt your leadership style in order to encourage creativity in others? What stifles creativity?
- Tell us about a time when you hired someone who made you uncomfortable. In what way was that discomfort an advantage? A disadvantage?
- Tell us about your relationship with your current board. Describe the most challenging conversations you've had and the outcomes.
- Lead us in a conversation on (a topic of your choice).

Reframed, those sorts of questions can be posed to candidates' references, too (e.g., "Does the candidate welcome conflict and see it as a source of necessary change?").

At a time when innovation is at a premium and the future for higher education is more unpredictable than ever, creative abrasion is a concept that future presidents, candidates, search committees, and trustees simply must embrace. Creative abrasion, with all of its messy edges, must become an underlying theme running through the presidential-search

process and a best practice. Presidents and boards ignore or avoid it — and adhere to the status quo — at their peril.

Lucy A. Leske is a senior partner with the executive search firm WittKieffer. She has led a broad range of searches, including presidential, vice presidential, decanal, and provostial searches, during her 20-year tenure with the company