

## Leadership Burnout and Board Governance

David J. Gyertson, Ph.D.  
Vice President

Why are governing Boards not alert to the facts that their successful CEOs are burning out? Trustees become aware of strains on leadership when indicators of institutional viability are underperforming. However, when success indicators are positive, it is easy to assume that the one leading the success also is healthy. Boards are surprised when they discover that their high functioning CEO begins showing signs of burnout.

Leaders, who take the major responsibilities for success on their own shoulders, are most prone to burnout. Classic signs include creeping negativity, exaggerated irritability when decisions or direction are challenged, insensitivity to support staff, aggressive assertions of authority and a variety of classic stress indicators including persistent tiredness, waning motivations, family tensions and increased demands for absolute loyalty. There are several helpful resources on the Board's role in identifying and responding to CEO burnout proactively. [This one](#) is particularly insightful.

Another reason Boards need to be alert to leadership burnout, and an indication that it may be present, is the escalation of toxic workplace complaints and litigations. The challenges of sustaining a viable institution now require significant impact on employee positions, salaries, morale, and related matters requiring consolidations and "right sizing".

Boards can miss these indicators when they do not have well defined executive parameters, and the means for their continuous assessment, in place that appropriately monitor the CEO's performance and impact. This is true when there is minimal feedback available to the Board from core constituencies that are most impacted by the leader's stress reactions. I find that faithful Christian employees are hesitant to express concerns and complaints about the CEO out of fear of retaliation but mostly, out of obedience to

the biblical mandates to "pray for those in authority" (I Timothy 2:1-4), not "touch God's anointed" (I Chron. 16:22, Psalm 105:15-17) and serve sacrificially even at personal hardship and difficulty (Ephesians 6:5-12).

It is never easy for "Nathan's" to address a leader's dysfunctions (2 Samuel 12). And it is challenging for Boards to determine if such concerns are merely anecdotal, from a few disgruntled folks not getting their way, or more broadly represented in the supporting constituencies. Tools like "360 reviews" done by competent professionals, validated climate assessment instruments like Best Christian Workplaces, regular employee satisfaction surveys and exit interviews can provide more accurate and representative understandings. Boards need established policies for gathering such information as part of their expectations for CEO reporting and assessment. And ensuring that effective "whistle blower" policies and practices are in place to responsibly address significant leadership dysfunctions are essential. Such policies, tools and practices can help Boards better deal with concerns and not discount them because their CEO is perceived as effective in achieving viability and success benchmarks.

A healthy organization does not always indicate a healthy leader. In these days of unprecedented pressures on leaders, governing Boards must be more alert to the care and nurture of their CEOs, addressing indicators of burnout quickly, responsibly, and compassionately.

*David Gyertson has a broad and varied background in higher education, executive search, ministry and media. Has a Ph.D. from Michigan State University in Higher Education Administration and served as President of Regent University, Asbury University and Taylor University. David specializes in board governance training, transition planning and on-boarding of new executives. He can be reached at [david@dingman.com](mailto:david@dingman.com)*