



## ESSENTIAL 1: Respect the Past and the Future

The board seeks to balance respect for the ways things have been with a robust anticipation of what's to come.

### SUMMARY

You may have heard the saying, “Those who control the purse strings, run the show.” But in reality, it’s often the storytellers who are the real power brokers. Storytelling has been described as core to all human interaction. It’s no surprise, then, that boards of theological schools are encouraged to be attentive to the stories swirling throughout the institution – especially those that emerge in the boardroom.

In prosperous times, stories reinforce a seminary community’s best efforts; in challenging times, they inspire and offer hope. However, stories can also be misused to distort and obscure. When required to adjudicate between competing “truths,” the best boards uncover the facts. Yet, as Dr. Rod Wilson Wise Stewards coach and long-time seminary president, notes “In a head-to-head battle, stories almost always win over statements, documents, or arguments.” To effectively lead, boards must ensure the institutional story is clearly established and well-rehearsed before wading into the fray.

While some issues require confidentiality, when boards withhold information that could/should be shared, they create gaps into which the uninformed can/will insert speculation. To address this, the In Trust Center’s Board Performance Survey encourages boards to 1) proactively explain their decisions – especially the difficult ones – to those most impacted, and 2) maintain as much transparency as possible in their communication and reporting.

None of this is easy. Even in the smallest theological school, opinions abound about the wisdom, mission impact, and potential long-term implications of virtually every consequential decision. Adding to the complexity are the challenges of social media and bad news that has gone viral. The further removed people are from the decision-making process, the more colorful the tales.

### A CONCLUDING THOUGHT

Wise steward boards strive to be both honest and respectful as they listen to the stories of others within the seminary community, all while remaining resolute in their responsibility to safeguard and shape the institutional narrative that they hold in trust. They artfully integrate

past, present, and future, confident that, as a board chair put it, “God takes our stories and makes something great.”

## QUESTIONS TO ASK BOARDS

- What is the overarching narrative of your school that the board members are responsible for telling and tending? How are new members introduced to this narrative? (Investigative)
- How can the board make itself aware of the stories “swirling throughout the institution” without getting pulled into administrative details or intermural conflicts? (Speculative)
- Who are the key storytellers within the board, institution, and broader community who the board members need to engage with? How will hearing from these storytellers enhance the board’s effectiveness in governance? (Subjective)



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