

## Assessing Presidential Performance: How to Do it Well

By Kenneth Alan Shaw

A recent AGB survey revealed that 86 percent of private and 92 percent of public institutions are conducting annual presidential performance reviews. This number has steadily increased over the past decade. Not everyone is doing them, but just about.

So, are boards doing them well, and can they do it better? That depends on the answers to several questions: 1.) Why is assessment important? 2.) How can a board get up to speed? 3.) When should presidential assessment start? 4.) What are some best practices? 5.) What practices should boards avoid?

1. Assessment is important for two primary reasons. First, one of the governing board's principal responsibilities is to help the chief executive grow and become more effective each year. Assessment is an important way to make this happen. Second, the information obtained during the process helps the board make decisions about compensation and continuing support for the president.
2. To get up to speed, the board should take advantage of what others have learned through study and experience. AGB will soon publish a book on assessment by Richard L. Morrill, University of Richmond chancellor and a consultant on governance, leadership and strategy. AGB workshops and the use of consultants are other ways to avoid reinventing the wheel.
3. Presidential assessment should begin during contract negotiations by giving the candidate the opportunity to offer his or her views about the process. It should be made clear from the start that the board is interested in the new president's growth and plans to offer constructive feedback on a regular basis. The candidate who balks has done you a great service. Find someone else.
4. Best practices do exist. First, annual and then periodic, more-comprehensive reviews are essential. The former usually involve the president's self assessment, analysis of goals and accomplishments from the previous year, and input from trustees. Comprehensive assessment usually occurs every three to five years. It includes confidential feedback from internal and external stakeholders, review of relevant materials from previous assessments, and the president's self assessment. Often, a consultant is hired to provide guidance, conduct interviews, and report back to the president and the board. In addition to the president's self assessment, he or she should provide a specific plan for personal and professional development. Too often, the board and president feel that their work is done once the evaluation is completed.

A spirit of openness should prevail during the entire process. In a confidential setting, the board can learn how to better help the president grow and become even more successful. In this sense, presidential assessment is the first step in board self assessment. Further, the process helps develop mutual understanding of future goals, enabling the board and the president to work together as a team. Finally, should there be a parting of the ways, all involved can feel the process was both fair and constructive (this won't always occur, but it is a goal).

5. Pitfalls exist. First, unless it is required by law, don't make assessment a public circus. Personal growth seldom occurs in that kind of environment. If it must be public, find gentle ways to suggest improvement and provide positive comments. Further, don't use the assessment process to solve a nasty problem. If the president isn't performing, show him or her the door (nicely, of course). If there is a crisis of confidence, try to stay with the processes you have agreed upon. In addition, don't use rating scales or checklists that typically only statisticians employ, since few such metrics draw out the kind of information really needed. And finally, don't just go through the motions. It is important that the board and its president take assessment seriously and do it right.

Kenneth A. Shaw is emeritus chancellor and University Professor at Syracuse University ([kashaw@syr.edu](mailto:kashaw@syr.edu)).