Let's Stay Together: The Board/CEO Relationship

IEG Spring Seminar
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8 a.m.
Ballroom III

Terry MacTaggart, facilitator

A new group of trustees, including several recently retired executives from the corporate world, found themselves on the board of a large and growing southern university. These trustees wished to lead the university in directions that would more directly support economic development in the region. They expected strong leadership from their president, who also was relatively new to the institution and her role. Having worked with boards themselves in their corporate lives, they wished to avoid micromanaging the institution and were prepared, in their own minds at least, to delegate responsibility to the president.

The first major opportunity for board action came in October 2002 when a local television station broadcast a tape of one of the tenured faculty members, an Arab-American U.S. citizen, exhorting a crowd to support the Palestine Liberation Organization and work for the "destruction" of Israel. While the speech was delivered at a private function, the tape became widely available.

Outraged by what they saw, the board members took up the matter with the president in public meetings and in private, more heated, phone conversations. Unsatisfied with the response, the board chair and several members decided to hire an attorney to investigate on their behalf the feasibility of terminating the professor's contract. The attorney concluded that, because the speech might incur the wrath of citizens and thus make the campus an unsafe place to study or work, the university's bylaws permitted the dismissal of the faculty member. Armed with this advice, the board chair, in a private conversation, strongly advised the president to fire the professor. Subsequently, this proposal surfaced at a public board meeting and became widely known in the community.

The president discussed this situation with her key staff, but now finds herself in a quandary. She hesitates to dismiss the faculty member without some kind of due process. At the same time, she knows that if she takes the matter to the faculty senate, it will support his retention in the name of academic freedom and solidarity. Meanwhile, the campus is receiving a few threats each week incited by the growing publicity surrounding this problem.

Questions for discussion:

1. How could this situation have been managed better earlier?

2. Now that the chair has delivered his recommendation, what options are available to the president?

3. What principles of sound board-president relations have been violated here? How could sound principles have been employed to achieve better results?

4. Is this a case involving rights to academic freedom or free speech or neither?

5. What can presidents and boards do to prepare themselves for similar situations involving faculty and students?

6. What should the president do now?