

Lisa lives just a few miles from an attractive community college — acres of grass and parking, good programs and competent instructors — but she drives 30 miles to another district where parking is scarce and classes are crowded. When asked why, she says her local college is having problems. “You read about it in the papers all the time. The faculty are fighting each other. The students hang out in ethnic cliques. Teachers grumble about the administration, even in class. Now students are protesting, because a favorite teacher didn’t get tenure. You can feel the tension.”

At the competing district, she feels more like being in college. “The classes are great and the faculty seem very professional. Instead of noon rallies where everybody shouts, we have a speaker series. We talk about big issues instead of campus politics. I don’t know, it just feels more intellectual, more grown up.”

What makes one college run as smooth as an ocean liner and another like a tramp steamer with a mutinous crew? A recent, informal poll of trustees, CEOs and officers of faculty organizations from six districts provides a range of opinions about what makes one district fail while others succeed. The survey was limited to a small, paired sample of colleges regarded as either doing well or in trouble. To encourage frank and honest comment, the names of respondents and the institutions remain anonymous.

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LEADERSHIP

If the key to business success is location, location, location, certainly the secret to college success is leadership, leadership, leadership. In any college, there are four powerful players, each with strengths derived from different domains and sources — CEO, trustees, faculty unions and senates. While old hierarchies of power have flattened because of collective bargaining and senate empowerment, the CEO is still the Zeus who most determines the fate of districts.

CEO LEADERSHIP

Without exception, respondents agree that a major mark of institutional success is a strong, disciplined leader who builds unity and inspires members to pursue a grand collective vision. The characteristics cited as essential include the ability to: • listen, speak and persuade well • cultivate relationships based on trust and mutual respect • assure open, collaborative decision making • provide access to accurate financial and institutional data • promote long-range planning • encourage faculty innovation and development • support students through services and an outstanding educational program, and • relate well with the community. Although it reads like a wish list, respondents regard these as imperatives, along with other qualities like intelligence, sensitivity, honesty, fairness, humor, enthusiasm and organization. While not all successful districts agreed that their top leaders are charismatic paragons, all acknowledged that competent leadership is a prime cause of their success.

Success: A CEO widely recognized for enlightened leadership credits his success to clear communication, logical persuasion, transparent budgeting and the willingness of all segments to stay focused on overarching institutional values while anchored to a strong work ethic. Each segment — management, unions, senates, classified — understands its particular strengths and constraints, and makes practical decisions based not on narrow self interest, but on what collectively needs to be done to move the whole district forward. It means honoring the district heritage and culture, but recognizing that while stability is important, dogged commitment to past practices

may inhibit the ability to respond flexibly to challenges. It requires confidence in the facts, a pragmatic assessment of problems, and the belief that all segments, by virtue of their expertise and experience, have unique insights into how best to resolve problems. While classified employees may have least clout in certain governance settings, for example, they know from experience how important decisions made at the top will play out in the day-to-day operations of the district. “Collective experience enhances the quality and credibility of the decisions we make.”

Success: A union leader from a district widely considered a model of success reports that the multi-college district rode out a serious financial crisis, because faculty and senate leaders had great confidence in their well-respected CEO and in their transparent budget process. “We knew from the start that the figures were accurate,” he said, which made it easier to work productively and make sensible decisions. The CEO, who held leadership breakfasts with faculty every two weeks, also had a gift for explaining budget matters clearly and rallying staff. “There was a high level of trust among all players. We kept everybody, including the community, well informed.” Of great importance, the CEO worked closely with the district’s “well-educated and progressive board,” and won their support.

Success: A faculty leader attributes the success of her district to the CEO’s legendary support for academic leadership. The college offers a full range of courses, emphasizes student-to-student tutoring, and collects data on student equity to constantly fine tune the learning process. Senates review all programs every five years for currency and multi-cultural breadth, new hires are diligently mentored, and all faculty receive diversity training. Students manage their own million-dollar budget, run the college speaker series, and sponsor a rich mix of clubs and events. The board receives high marks for its ability to hire top managers, best exemplified in strategic planning. For instance, before a bond measure was passed, everyone knew exactly how and when the money would be spent, with top priority given to classroom renovation, learning facilities and state-of-the-art technology. Faculty have a strong union that uses interest-based bargaining, the contract is very comprehensive and clear, and most important, an enlightened conciliation process quietly resolves most problems. “This is a district that has problems like all others, but we have excellent leadership and our priorities are straight.”

Failure: Respondents in one district blame serious problems on a bright but impatient president who fails to engage, listen well, reconcile differences, or persuade others to follow her vision. When her reorganization proposal was rejected, because it uprooted a decades-old past practice, she unilaterally imposed change. Any action imposed by fiat can cause an irrational standoff with parties demonizing each other, as happened in this case. Factions grew, productivity dropped, and as enrollment and resources shrank, management overacted with unilateral cuts and, eventually, had to impose layoffs and union take backs. The easiest solution — changing the CEO — is not an option, because dismissal would be a loss of face for the politicized board. And voluntary resignation is problematic, because bad press and bad mouths have soured prospects for a new post for the beleaguered CEO. The result — ongoing shock and awe. Senior members express sorrow over the fall of a great college, once regarded as one of the best in the state.

Failure: District X is in serious trouble because of a “disastrous change” in leadership. After the previous chancellor “squandered” resources, spending up to millions in one year for legal expenses, and throwing the two-college district into “dizzying turmoil,” the search team selected a new CEO from a “small backwater college,” who was considered the opposite of his flamboyant predecessor. The goal was to restore hope, morale and fiscal stability. But staff soon learned they had made a serious mistake. “Riding in on a white charger, he brandished a saber and vowed to ‘turn things around in one year.’ He did, but it was more

like upside down.” His philosophy was that “top-down management is the only responsible and efficient way to achieve financial stability and grow the bottom line.” Claiming that the district was in imminent danger of “the worst-ever bankruptcy,” managers met in secret and slashed programs indiscriminately, eliminating cafeteria service to both colleges (without considering the impact on students), and terminating agricultural programs that led to local jobs and a theater arts program popular with minorities. Some of the cuts seemed retaliatory, punishing outspoken faculty. “Our already low enrollments will soon begin a death spiral,” the respondent said, deploring the lack of common sense in downsizing, and the failure to realize the difficulty of recovery. Because programs were eliminated, rather than phased out, some students will be stranded mid-way through their course of study, giving rise to tensions. The union is at impasse and is facing take backs, and collaborative decision making is constrained. “We have completely lost our vision, our purpose, our commitment to students and the community,” the respondent lamented.

Failure: Respondents report that the local board and CEO work in tandem to dominate this multi-college district through micro management and an anti-faculty attitude. The college presidents have little autonomy and “are hamstrung” by district demands. Out of fear of retaliation, the colleges have “pulled back” and fail to innovate and problem solve at the local level. The college academic senates have tried to work collegially, but since local managers do not have the authority to make independent decisions, progress stagnates. “The CEO values loyalty instead of skills and functions more like a college president with two vice-presidents.” He has failed to create a common vision and properly engage the community. The situation has so affected management morale in the last few years that turnover is approaching 100 percent. The union recently won a good contract and is committed to “electing a new board through political action.”

TRUSTEE LEADERSHIP

The trustees derive their authority from statute and hold the institution in trust for those who elected them. They have great power in that they hire/fire the chancellor and chief counsel, approve budgets, and influence negotiations. As individuals, they have no legal authority; they are empowered only when a majority meets in public session.

Success: A major reason for district success, according to a respondent, is a well-respected, intelligent and informed board that makes open and fair decisions that reflect the welfare of the entire institution. This good board not only listens to and engages the public, it maintains strong contacts with the community through business, labor and civic organizations; it has a global perception of the problems and solutions, as well as the needs of the overall community. It treats students and staff with respect, participates in district functions, and stresses strategic planning, collaborative decision making, budget integrity and timely data. In this district, faculty, staff and unions are actively involved in board elections. There is a perception that candidates who have worked as faculty or administrators in community colleges often make superior trustees. “They understand the system and its problems,

and are up to speed when sworn in.”

Failure: A weak or autocratic board, on the other hand, is often cited as one of the hallmarks of a failing college. The board’s ability to govern well is limited in that it consists of lay persons who depend on information from those they govern. They often don’t have the time or expertise to check out details, and they are intimidated by the Brown Act, reluctant to discuss issues in public and even meet with faculty. And because they are part-time governors, often with full-time jobs elsewhere, their contact with their community is minimal. In time, as one respondent reports, their district board grew “lazy” — too dependent on management for cues, and unresponsive to concerns from staff and the public. “After 7 years, one member is still fuzzy about terms, like student equity and FTES.”

Failure: Respondents in a troubled district report that one of its board members has a corrosive bias against faculty members and perceives them as self serving, indolent and a major cause of the district’s financial/enrollment problems. This trustee esteems corporate style leaders who stand firm and impose top-down directives by force, if necessary. By virtue of this person’s abrasive and intimidating style, he has alienated faculty and discouraged the collaborative rigor necessary to reconcile parties and address fundamental problems.

Ironically, management leaders in this same institution describe this same board as remarkably together and “focused primarily on the welfare of the district.” The anti-faculty bias is dismissed as “payback” for the constant public criticism of the board by senate and union leaders. Such radically different views reflect strong, conflicting biases that permeate the culture: factions wrestle in the dark of mutual contempt, oblivious to all the high-minded principles enshrined in mission and vision statements.

Failure: Weak boards are sometimes co-opted by strong CEOs. In another failing district, the majority of the five-member board “blindly” supports an autocratic CEO and tends to accept — without criticism — his assessments and recommendations, especially a “Wal-Mart” concept that the best way to maximize profits (the ending balance) is to trim quality and keep the demands of labor in check. While this board prides itself on its ability to ask sharp questions, it seldom examines the quality of the responses or the accuracy of the facts. Instead of active leadership, “the trustees are more interested in their status as local celebrities and the flattering attention they receive from the CEO who wines and dines them and squires them to official gatherings.” In a counter thrust, opponents feed information to a sympathetic local paper, and the pressure of negative coverage is beginning to temper behavior.

FACULTY LEADERSHIP

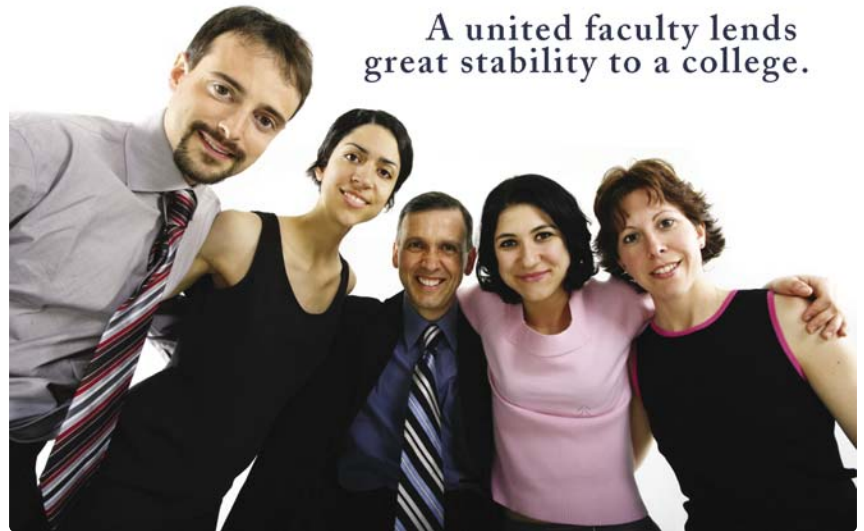
AB 1725 confers significant authority on faculty and academic senates — they are not factory workers producing widgets, as business-trained CEOs and board members sometimes think. The law holds that faculty members derive their authority from their expertise as teachers and subject matter specialists as well as from their status as professionals. The law mandates that local boards empower faculty, staff, and students to “express their opinions at the campus level and to ensure that these opinions are given every reasonable consideration, and the right to participate effectively in district and college governance, and the right of academic senates to assume primary responsibility for making recommendations in the areas of curriculum and academic standards.” The key phrase, “participate effectively,” has given rise to a system called participatory governance. In place over a decade, however, this decision making process is often misunderstood by both management and faculty.

Failure: Surprisingly, only one CEO attributed major problems to a conflict with faculty leadership, particularly the academic senate. Because of disputes over who has authority to make certain decisions, she has attempted to codify the powers and responsibilities of management vis-à-vis senates, much like union-management relations are codified in a contract. But the Academic Senate has rejected the outcome, forcing the CEO to make unilateral decisions that inflame relations and divide faculty. All sides feel universally abused in a stalemate that will soon mark its third anniversary. A CEO from a successful district says, "It's not just a simple lose-lose conflict between two parties, it's an everybody loses situation. A solution doesn't require great wisdom, just a little common sense."

Other respondents took well-aimed potshots at "participatory governance" but did not rank it as the principal cause of district problems — regarding it, rather, as an intrusion into their sphere of authority. "It slows decision making and confers power without accountability." "There's confusion over the difference between governance and management." "We get mired in process and endless debate." Even worse, "[i]f faculty don't like the result, they claim they were ignored and refuse to support the outcome."

Administrators also claim that academic senates sometimes are too parochial and conservative in their views. Unaware of local and state financial, demographic and educational trends, they stubbornly resist change. For example, the introduction of an economic development program in one district caused long-term problems over its role in the educational program (for senates) and the implication of contract instruction (for unions), but "clearer communication by management could have lessened opposition."

Some respondents believe that faculty senates and unions squabble over issues that overlap the interests of both organizations, like evaluations and grievances, and may retreat to opposing camps over how to deal with, for example, an autocratic CEO. "When faculty break into hostile factions, especially in a district with management problems and shrinking enrollment and dollars, the potential for widespread disruption is great." The point is that when a major financial or leadership tremor strikes, established customs and relations may fail, but they are the effect rather than the principal cause of failure.



Success: In one thriving college, respect is mutual and the tone collegial. "Academic leaders realize that good decisions require vigorous debate, compromise and consensus." They cultivate relationships, communicate well, and hold as their highest priority innovation and academic matters like tenure, curriculum, standards and student outcomes. They are also well informed on issues, and often hold leadership roles with local and state organizations. They consider themselves equal in power and pride to their union colleagues, and consult with them on evaluation, grievance and tenure issues. In one college, the senate has been given a seat at the union negotiation table. A united faculty lends great stability to a college.

A CEO from another successful college says, "Warring factions, protests and blame games are strong signs of failed governance and weak leadership. In our district, we know that shared governance is neither a political process where the strong dominate, nor a democracy where all have equal vote." It's a forum for deliberation where members listen to each other and devise strategies that minimize harm to segments, while promoting the welfare of all. To do so requires "clarity, logic, good will, and commitment to core institutional values and vision. Enlightened sacrifice helps us flourish, even in dire times, and serve our students and community well. Locking horns is best left to mating animals."

CONCLUSION

This modest survey of opinions doesn't claim to trace the intricate web of causes that influence behavior and account for success or failure. It is more like a series of black and white photos that freeze institutions in revealing moments. It does make clear, however, that enlightened leadership is one of the most important determinants of institutional success. In the hierarchy of power and authority, the CEO is still the one most responsible for the spirit and welfare of a district, and the one who ultimately decides how far Lisa must drive to find a good college. ■



Cy Gulassa served as president of the Faculty Association of Foothill De Anza Community College District (1982-97), and was a founding member of the Bay Faculty Association and the California Community College Independents, the latter a coalition of independent faculty unions. He was president of FACCC (1985-87), and was chair of the State Task Force on personnel issues, the recommendations of which were incorporated into the omnibus reform bill known as AB 1725. Provisions included participatory governance, peer review, 4-year tenure, and the substitution of minimum qualifications for teaching credentials, thereby making the CC system partners with CSU and UC instead of an extension of K-12. In 1995, he was named FACCC's "Faculty Member of the Year," and last November, he was elected to the board of trustees of the Peralta Community College District.