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Why Governing Is So Difficult: A Synthesis of the (Other) Literature

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Abstract

Governing boards have a history of underperformance. Yet, most attempted strategies address the recognized problems of inexperienced trustees, infrequent meetings, and trustees' lack of understanding of higher education. They include steps such as clarifying board roles and responsibilities, better orientations, more information, and restructuring the board. Yet, these commonly advocated strategies yield few consistent results. This paper looks beyond the typical problems and solutions for underlying causes that might make governance difficult. It synthesizes literature from psychology, business, behavioral economics, group behavior, and related areas to develop propositions that help explain board behavior (or mis-behavior) to suggest deeper causes of board misbehavior via a set of propositions. These propositions focus on the nature of high-powered groups, overconfidence, group information bias and group processes, all of which constrain board effectiveness. The paper concludes with a series of recommendations for practitioners and for researchers to further address what look like perennial governance problems.

Key Words:

Governance; Trustees; Decision Making; Group Processes; Organizational Theory

Introduction

Governing boards have and continue to play significant roles at colleges and universities, yet from within their ranks comes a seemingly long and steady list of poor if not disruptive behavior. The issue seems to be that the problems continue, such as self-inflicted board failures at Adelphi University in the 1990s (Leatherman, 1997), American University in the 2000s (Janofsky, 2005), the University of Virginia in 2012 (Stripling, 2012), and the University of Maryland in 2018 (Pettit, 2018), to name a few high-profile examples from different decades. The organizational and legal significance of boards cannot be understated because they serve as fiduciary agents and are the legal authority recognized by governments and the law (Association of Governing Boards, 2015a; Committee of University Chairs, 2014). Furthermore, the importance of and interest in lay boards, such as those found in the U.S., U.K., Canada, and Australia, is growing. Countries as diverse as Kazakhstan, India, and Malaysia, are undertaking governance reform and creating or altering independent governing boards (Chandra, 2017; Hartley, Gopaul & Sagintayeva, 2015; Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2015). Yet, effective governance is elusive (Chait, Holland & Taylor, 1991 Association of Governing Boards 2015b). Boards in different national and cultural contexts struggle to be consequential (AGB, 2015b; Chandra, 2017), with many being "mediocre" at best (Eckel & Trower, 2018, p. 33).

Boards face well-known problems. For "lay" boards, those largely composed of outsiders, the first problem is the individual members. Trustees come from varied professional backgrounds with different norms and ways of working (AGB, 2016a), and are often inexperienced with higher education, except as students. They also tend to be accomplished individuals unaccustomed to making decisions collectively (Chait, Holland & Taylor, 1993). This creates a situation akin to "an orchestra of soloists" (Chait, 2006, p. 2) in which individuals are comfortable in the spotlight, but together do not function well. Second, structural constraints exist. Boards do not spend significant time on campus and trustees may not be aware of immediate campus issues (Chait, Ryan & Taylor, 2006). Finally, the mechanics of governance may impede board work; boards have limited time to devote to complex issues (Trower, 2013), and their meetings are episodic, occurring in many cases only three times a year.

Efforts to address common governance shortcomings tend to take a similar approach. They seek to specify or clarify board roles and responsibilities (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2015; AGB, 2010), consist of enhanced orientations, attempt restructuring (AGB, 2015c; Holtschneider, 2013; LeBlanc, 2017), and give more attention to meeting agendas (Eckel & Trower, 2018). In fact, AGB notes, "Good board governance is simple. All that is needed is for the right people to be on the board, for the board to address the right issues, and for board members to engage in the right ways." (AGB, 2018, p. 3). However, trends and patterns in board misbehavior suggest governance more difficult than that.

What if the obstacles to effective boards run deeper than identifying the right people, putting the right issues in front of the board or having board members engage? Regarding corporate boards, Forbes and Milliken (1999) wrote:

> *[Boards] of directors can be characterized as large, elite, and episodic decision-making groups that face complex tasks pertaining to strategic-issue processing … they are particularly vulnerable to "process losses" (Steiner, 1972)—the interaction difficulties that prevent groups from achieving their full potential (p. 492).*

This quote suggests that the whole of collective efforts often is less than the sum of its parts, otherwise known as "process loss." Why should this be so?

In order to take on a complex question about governing board effectiveness, this paper narrows the scope of board work to decision-making--what boards do (Bailey & Peck, 2013; Useem, 2003). "The corporate concept of the group as the decision-making entity constitutes a core value and fundamental tenet of trusteeship" (Chait, Holland & Taylor, 1991 p. 59). Boards approve budgets, large purchases, strategic plans, and policy changes; review presidential and institutional performance; hire (and fire) presidents; determine investment strategies; and sign off on building plans and real estate deals. This paper synthesizes atypical literature from outside of higher education to identify and explore the potential factors that may shape how boards work (or don't work) related to decision-making. It is guided by these research questions:

- What are the conceptual and theoretical underpinnings of decision-making among high-powered groups that may explain board behavior (or misbehavior)?
- How might boards mitigate the challenges they face related to decision-making by addressing potential underlying issues?

Methodology

Boards are difficult to study empirically due to problems with access (Daily, Dalton, & Cannella, 2003; Forbes & Milliken, 1999), time, and possible legal liabilities (Stevenson & Radin, 2015). Thus, this line of inquiry begins conceptually and, following the path of Hambrick, Werder and Zajac's (2008) review of corporate governance, is illustrative rather than comprehensive. The aim is to frame propositions about how boards decide that might later be explored empirically.

This research starts from some common and recognized aspects of university board work related to decision-making:

- Boards are collectives of individuals that must work together to render decisions (AGB, 2016a; Trower, 2013);
- Boards tend to be made up of influential and accomplished individuals who are recognized by others (who make appointments to boards) for their success (AGB, 2016a; Chait, 2006);
- Boards consider information familiar and unfamiliar to academic outsiders in order to make decisions (AGB 2015b; Chait, Holland & Taylor, 1993; Chait 2017; Trower, 2013); and,

- Boards develop patterns of engagement and interactions that can become solidified over time (Alderfer, 1986; Sonnonfield, 2002; Chait 2017; Trower, 2013).

ERIC, PsychINFO, ABI/Inform, Business Source Complete, PsycNet, and PsychINFO were searched for articles using key words: boards, power, group effectiveness, group decision-making, problem solving, conflict, status, social influence, social cohesion, judgment, confidence, and commitment. The citations in early rounds of identified articles suggested additional resources. These searches identified 89 articles and studies across a range of fields and locations including the United States, the Netherlands, Italy, England, Israel, and Hong Kong.

This undertaking has limitations. First, the number of potentially related studies is vast, and researcher bias may elevate the perceived importance of some articles and topics and downplay others. Second, the literature identified may not apply to university boards. For example, some research cited was conducted in laboratory settings, often with undergraduates who are different from the typical trustee. Third, some of the research on decision-making is grounded in the assumption that there is one best outcome that can be determined. Finally, the work of boards typically doesn't adhere to this paradigm; instead, as in the field of sociology (Bruch & Feinberg, 2017), board decisions often do not have an optimal answer.

Findings: Identifying Probable Undercurrents

This synthesis uncovered the following topics as potentially helpful to understanding the challenges facing governing boards: organizational power, group decision processes, competency, and overconfidence.

Power Amongst the Powerful

A central element of group relations is power dynamics (Bolman & Deal, 1995; Tarakci, Greer & Groenen, 2016). Trustees, as the legal authority of the institution and with the support of government, hold significant power and, through their work, exercise significant influence (Hambrick, Werder & Zajac, 2008; Greer, van Bunderen & Yu, 2017; He & Huang, 2011; Lorsch, 2012). "Power is not an attribute possessed by someone in isolation. It is a relational phenomenon. Power is generated, maintained and lost in the context of relationships with others" (Pettigrew & McNulty, 1995, p. 851). Power allows individuals and groups to get things done and to move agendas ahead. Boards themselves are powerful bodies, and their internal power dynamics are often complex (Greer, Caruso, Jehn, 2011; Greer, van Bunderen &Yu, 2017; He & Huang, 2011). This review begins with the first point and continues to the second later in the paper.

One would expect that the concept that "the whole should be greater than the sum of its parts" would apply to high-powered groups such as boards. More is better, or at least it should be, but this isn't always the case.

Laboratory as well as field research suggest that high-powered teams often perform worse than teams with uniformly less-influential members. Greer and her colleague's research in the telecom and financial sectors found that powerful teams underperformed as compared to lower-powered teams: "High powered teams are not always high performers" (Greer, van Bunderen &Yu, 2011, p. 127). Simply because individuals are high performing and powerful does not mean that their success is amplified by other successful people or that success in an individual context is transferable to a group setting, such as a board.

The shortcomings in performance seem to be caused by the nature of high-powered individuals themselves. Groups of powerful people are hindered by success and status. "While the possession and experience of power can make individuals more capable than others on individual tasks, that same power appears to undermine their ability to get along and work with each other on collaborative tasks" (Hildreth & Anderson, 2016, p. 282). First, these people are used to pursuing their own agendas, rather than collaborating (Greer, Caruso & Jehn, 2011). Boards require members to render collective decisions, not advance their own interests. Second, high-powered individuals are more likely to undertake risk than less-powerful actors (Tost, Gino & Larrick, 2012). Their records of success lead them to overestimate positive outcomes. Third, teams of high-powered individuals are more likely to resist changing a course of action once decided because their successful track records and their reputations are on the line (Hildreth & Anderson, 2016). Finally, high-powered individuals spend time protecting and advancing their own status and position (Zhao & Greer, 2017), rather than focusing on the group tasks in front of them.

However, research shows that power isn't consistently problematic; it depends on the extent to which the work being done requires group members to collaborate or not. Studying power in athletic teams, Swaab and her colleagues (2014) found that too many powerful stars on one team was detrimental to performance when the type of work the team needed to be completed required task interdependence but power in teams doesn't matter as much in low interdependent work. In baseball, which requires more interdependence and less dependence, high powered teams didn't follow the same negative relationship pattern between talent and team performance as compared to basketball or American football. Thus, dependent work, in which individuals must rely on one another such as basketball or football, is likely to fall into the "too much talent" trap (Swaab, et. al., 2014). If boards follow similar patterns, work that requires all of the trustees may be open to the above identified shortcomings compared to work that doesn't require collective effort. (Think committees versus the whole board). The problem is that most meaningful and consequential work requires the involvement of the full board. Thus, star board members don't have opportunities to shine brightly on their own.

These insights lead to an initial set of propositions:

> **Proposition 1.1:** High-powered board members may pursue their interests at the expense of collective governance work.
>
> **Proposition 1.2:** High-powered boards may be less willing to change course than boards made up of less-powerful individuals.
>
> **Proposition 1.3:** High-powered boards may act in ways that protect individual status.

Proposition 1.4: Boards made up of high-powered individuals may take greater risks.

Proposition 1.5: Boards with low task interdependence may avoid many of these shortcomings as compared to boards with high task interdependence.

Advice-Taking by the Powerful

Power seems to affect not only how boards act but how they receive and process information. The ability to give and receive advice is important to university governance for three reasons. First, boards must make decisions as a collective (Hambrick, Werder & Zajac, 2008; Trower, 2013), and therefore individuals should heed the advice and input of other board members. Second, most board members come from outside the academy (AGB, 2016a) and thus are academic novices (Chait, Holland & Taylor, 1993). They would be well-served to take advice from experienced and expert administrators, faculty and others. Finally, higher education is known for its traditions and structures of shared governance (Birnbaum, 1988; Bowan & Tobin, 2015; Eckel & Trower, 2019), in which groups of administrators, trustees, and academics make collective decisions on behalf of the institution. Advice is an ingrained cultural artifact of the academy.

The literature suggests that boards, because of their power dynamics, may not be open to advice. Greater powered individuals usually accept less advice from others, particularly from people they see as less important (Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, Whitson & Liljenquist, 2008), even if the advice is likely to improve group performance (see, Morrison, Rothman & Soll, 2011). The success of highly influential individuals means that they trust their own judgments and actions. Furthermore, high-powered individuals not only resist advice, but they discount advice from others, even if those advisors have high levels of expertise themselves (see, Morrison, Rothman & Soll, 2011; Tost, Gino & Larrick, 2012). Instead, the powerful often assume that others share their perspectives and ways of understanding (Galinsky, Magee, Inesi & Gruenfeld, 2006). They direct not listen; everyone already agrees with them. Finally, highly influential individuals are less attuned to what is happening in the environment (Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, Whitson & Liljenquist, 2008; Morrison, Rothman & Soll, 2011); they may seem to know the answers before they've been asked the questions.

The pattern of resistance to advice increases when highly influential individuals are in competitive situations or when their status or degree of influence is threatened (Tost, Gino & Larrick, 2012). Thus, if boards members believe their status is threatened by faculty members or campus administrators, or if they are under public scrutiny, they may be even less willing to consider advice. All of this is problematic for boards.

From this literature, a second set of propositions can be developed:

Proposition 2.1: Boards of high-powered individuals may resist taking or even actively discount advice offered by others.

Proposition 2.2: High-powered board members assume that others share their same perspective, even when they don't.

Proposition 2.3: High-powered board members may resist taking advice when they believe their status is threatened.

Pushed to Extreme Decision Outcomes

Powerful groups risk falling into a pattern of amplifying decisions, which results in making decisions more extreme, a decision-making concept called group polarization. This notion suggests that high-powered individuals often have strong opinions; when these individuals come together, these opinions grow stronger, often resulting in more extreme outcomes rather than more mediated ones. For example, in a study of corporate boards making CEO compensation decisions, Zhu (2014) demonstrated that directors who had individual prior experience of providing executives with above-market compensation were more likely as a group to agree to exceed market rates for their current CEO's compensation than were directors whose prior individual experience consisted of at-market-rate compensation. The inverse was also true regarding below market compensation resulting in further below market compensation.

It seems that board members are influenced by collective experience, resulting in amplified outcomes. Common wisdom suggests that group decisions can result in more moderate outcomes as different people weigh in. Group dynamics seems to suggest the opposite, that collective decisions are more severe than are those that were made individually. Boards may therefore work themselves into what might be called decision frenzies that result in more extremes, a spiral up or down.

Proposition 3.1: Boards of influential individuals are at risk for making more extreme decisions as a group than if individuals were polled independently.

Power Imbalances and Competency

The previous discussions are based on the assumption that boards consist of uniformly high-powered individuals. However, the reality is that the distribution of power within boards may be uneven. For example, trustees who are donors may have greater influence within boards than do less wealthy individuals (Chait, 2006). The same might be true for individual trustees of public universities with strong ties to the sitting governor. How does the variance of power within groups affect performance? This question looks to the idea of power dispersion (Greer, van Bunderen, & Yu, 2017; He & Huang, 2011; Tarakci, Greer, Groenen, 2016 Veltrop, Molleman, Hooghiemstra & van Ees, 2017).

The literature describes two different views of the impact of power dispersion. From the functionalist perspective, the power differences among team members satisfies a need for hierarchy and structure, provides a social status ladder for lower-ranked members to climb, creates clearer divisions of labor and responsibilities, and provides role clarity to members of the team depending upon their status (Greer, van Bunderen & Zhu, 2017). The concentration of power in a few actors is seen as beneficial (Groysberg et al, 2011; Swaab et al, 2014).

Those scholars who adopt the second perspective, a conflict perspective, view power differentiated teams as problematic. This line of research argues that power dispersion increases inter-group conflict, reduces information sharing, and impedes team members from helping each other. Low-status team members seek to gain more power while high-status ones work to hold on to their superior positions. These factors create distractions, lead to different team member priorities and interests, and harm interpersonal relationships (Bloom, 1999; van Bunderen, Greer & van Knippenberg, 2017; Greer, van Bunderen & Zhu 2017; Thomas-Hunt, Ogden & Neale, 2003). Boards in practice may experience both functionalist and conflict elements.

Organizational scholars are trying to understand the conflicting findings. One line of inquiry focuses on the competency of individuals within a team. Highly and uniformly competent teams seem to benefit from power dispersion, whereas low-competency teams do not (Tarakci, Greer & Groenen, 2016). For example, when the most competent team members can be readily identified and given the most power, teams seem to benefit. In these situations, those who can do good work and have the power to do that work positively affect outcomes while those who are less competent have fewer channels to affect group outcomes. Boards that can identify competent members may benefit from power differences while those boards that cannot do so might be better off with flat structures so as to prevent low performers from gaining too much power and thus causing disruption.

A power hierarchy based on longevity, alumni status, political appointment, or philanthropy is likely to be disruptive unless it is also coupled with competence (Tarakci, Greer & Groenen, 2016). Given that boards often do a poor job of trustee evaluation (Chait, Holland & Taylor, 1991 Trower, 2013), they may have only impressionistic information about individual competence. When teams cannot easily discern high performers, “low power disparity may be more functional, giving credence to the rising trend of flatter organizational structures.” (Tarakci, Greer & Groenen, 2016, p. 427).

From this research the following propositions emerge:

> **Proposition 4.1:** Boards with power differentiation will have an easier time determining roles and responsibilities for individual board members.
>
> **Proposition 4.2:** Boards with power differentiation may have conflict between low- and high-status board members, and low-status board members will spend time seeking to increase their status on the board.
>
> **Proposition 4.3:** Boards that have highly competent individuals may benefit from power differentials when those board members are in influential roles and less competent individuals are not.
>
> **Proposition 4.4:** Boards that can discern board-related competence will be able to create effective board structures (flat or hierarchical) depending on the degree of competence among individual trustees.

Group Decisions and Bias

The accepted wisdom is that groups consistently make better decisions than individuals. This is because group decision-making benefits from a wider range of information contributed by a number of individuals as compared to the limited information upon which individuals base their decisions. More ideas and more diverse perspectives lead to richer discussions and better decisions goes the thinking. But laboratory and field research demonstrate that groups can fall short in their collective decision-making because of a failure to share and use information (Gigone & Hastie, 1993; Sunstein & Hastie, 2015). Those groups may instead tend to rely on suboptimal but commonly held information rather than benefiting from the unique knowledge held by various team members (Lu, Yuan & McLeod, 2012).

The quality of information used by groups to render collective decisions depends upon the extent to which information is widely known by members of the group or is known to just one person (Stasser & Titus, 2003; Sunstein & Hastie, 2015). As Sohrab, Waller & Kaplan (2015) write:

> *As a team, participants have enough information to make an informed decision; however, no individual has access to all of the information. Instead, information is distributed in a combination of shared information (available to all team members) and unshared information (unevenly distributed among participants, usually only available to a single individual). As a result, teams can only make the most accurate decisions provided that they effectively pool the information from all members. (p. 490)*

Group decision-making research shows that people with unique knowledge (known to themselves, but not to others) tend not to share it, even when it is accurate and possibly important to the group's decision (Stasser & Titus, 2003; Sunstein & Hastie, 2015). Although everyone seems to have examples of when they contributed something novel to a group, the research suggests there is just if not more self-editing than advancing, consciously or unconsciously. The roadblocks to good decision-making are generated by a variety of group dynamics including who speaks first, who shares the information, and the power dynamics within the group.

The dynamics of who speaks first in group discussions is called the cascade effect. "If the initial speakers in a group favor a particular course of action, the group may well end up favoring that position, even if it would not have done so if the initial speakers had been different…. The group's conclusion might well be an accident of who spoke first" (Sunstein & Hastie, 2015, p. 59-60). Early speakers set an idea in motion that dissuades those who have different information from sharing, an effect accentuated when multiple people confirm the first point made (Eyster & Rabin, 2014). Momentum silences diverse knowledge. Salganik and Watts (2008) studied online music and found that the perceived early success of a song can contribute to its ongoing success. People the opinions of others matters in whether they like or dislike a song. Songs liked early kept up momentum, even when the researchers manipulated which songs were positively affirmed. In the higher education context, the decision-making process about which presidential candidate to hire, for example, can begin with a statement by one trustee; if a second person affirms that same statement, the likelihood that others will contribute something different or a unique piece of information about that candidate or any other is reduced. Thus, a savvy board chair (or a devious one) will know whom to call upon first in a discussion, understanding that the first articulated idea has a high probability of advancing.

This dynamic is heightened in groups with limited time in which groups seek to streamline discussions or in those contexts in which members strive for conformity among members (Malenko, 2013). Boards pressed to make quick decisions because of overly full agendas or impatient chairs may limit information sharing.

Second, group members are more likely to contribute information if it is consistent with the information held by others and are less likely to share unique information. "Suppose that most people in your group believe that some proposition is true. If so, you have reason to believe that the proposition is in fact true, and this reason might seem to outweigh your purely private reasons to believe that the proposition is false… You might disregard your own information if most group members disagree with where you are headed" (Sunstein & Hastie, 2015, p. 24). Consensus knowledge can take precedence even if that that knowledge is wrong. Minority voices are silenced. "Group members prefer to hear information that is commonly held – and prefer to hear people who have such information…. Unfortunately, people who are more peripheral, with unique knowledge, are often the ones group members most need to hear" (Sunstein & Hastie, 2015, p. 95). Relatedly, groups are more likely to discuss the information they have in common than they are to spend time discussing information that is known by only one or a few members of the group. Shared information can influence decision-making simply because everyone knows it (Gigone & Hastie, 1993; Stasser & Titus, 2003).

Third, people don't share their unique knowledge when formal or informal leaders in the group are perceived to have a clear conviction. "People might be silent not because they think that they must be wrong… but instead to avoid the risk of social punishment of various sorts." (Sunstein & Hastie, 2015, p. 37). Group members withhold unique information in the hope of maintaining social standing in the group (Thomas-Hunt, Ogden & Neale, 2003). They don't want to risk alienating leaders or showing up other members of the group. This is particularly true for individuals of lesser standing in the group and those who have outlier opinions or ideas (Van Swol, Braun, Acosta Lewis, Carlson & Dimperio, 2018). Even if offered, the views of lesser group members will furthermore be perceived as being unhelpful despite the utility of the information (Thomas-Hunt, Ogden & Neale, 2003). However, one way for out-group members to have their unique information considered is to couple it with information that is widely shared within the group (Van Swol, et al., 2018). By confirming what the majority knows first, they then can work in their minority views or unique information.

The following propositions can be offered:

> **Proposition 5.1:** Boards in which the same few people always speak first may rely on limited information, as others may not share their knowledge.
>
> **Proposition 5.2:** Boards whose formal or informal leaders speak first may shut down

discussion and deliberation, as individuals of lesser status may not share.

Proposition 5.3: Boards may rely more on commonly shared knowledge than on unique knowledge that might be helpful, ultimately spending time talking about what they collectively already know rather than learning what they do not.

Overconfidence

Most boards seek accomplished individuals who are self-assured in their abilities, their self-confidence often gained from a history of success. However, boards, as many groups do, risk crossing the threshold of confidence to overconfidence, a state that is well-documented in the decision-making literature. Overconfidence has been identified as one of the key causes of excessive risk-taking, diagnostic errors, an unwillingness to revisit decisions, intransigent viewpoints, and intergroup conflict (Sanchez & Dunning, 2018). Overconfidence can mask incompetence (Anderson, Brion, Moore & Kennedy, 2012). It has been associated with wars, labor strikes, organizational failures, poor investment decisions, ill-fated mergers and acquisitions, stock market bubbles, and, in hospitals, patient deaths (Kahneman, 2011; Moore & Healy, 2008; Phau, Tham & Wei, 2017). While the exercise of university governance rarely comes with the same consequences, overconfidence may matter in the boardroom as well (Fattobene & Caiffa, 2016).

Overconfident individuals overestimate their performance or chances of success. They think their beliefs are more accurate than those of others and believe themselves to be better at certain tasks than others (Fast, Sivanathan, Mayer & Galinsky, 2012; Fattobene & Caiffa, 2016; Moore & Healy, 2008; Ronay, Oostrom, Lehmann-Willenbrock; & Van Vugt, 2016). "Organizations that take the word of overconfident experts can expect costly consequences" argues Nobel prize winner, Daniel Kahneman (2011, p. 262).

Boards may be ripe for falling victim to overconfidence. First, overconfidence is linked to power (Fast, et. al., 2012). As previously discussed, powerful people do not listen to input and are unwilling to take advice or to adjust their views (illusion of knowledge) and they take more risks because they are confident in their actions and tend to overestimate the likelihood of success (called, the illusion of control) (Fattobene & Caiffa, 2016; Moore & Healy, 2008; Ronay, et. al. 2016; See, et. al, 2011). Second, overconfidence and status are linked. Overconfidence contributes to status as it helps individuals appear more competent, even when individuals lack skill and knowledge. "If Persons A and B have equal levels of actual ability, but Person A has higher confidence than Person B, Person A will be seen as more competent and will attain higher status than Person B, even if Person A's confidence is unjustified" (Anderson, Brion, Moore & Kennedy, 2012, p. 720). Status in turn contributes to overconfidence, as high-status individuals tend to have faith in their ability to influence outcomes and rate their own performance more highly than that of others (Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfield, Whitson & Liljenquist, 2008). Third, confidence grows when people's ideas are corroborated by others, which can happen in boardrooms, particularly in those that prize congeniality over collegiality (Trower, 2013). "If your colleagues or friends tell you that you are right, you are more likely to think that you are right, even if you are pretty confused (and wrong)" (Sunstein & Hastie, 2015, p. 27).

New laboratory research adds an additional dimension to overconfidence that might be relevant in university boardrooms. Sanchez and Dunning (2018) show that overconfidence is related to levels of knowledge. Specifically, they demonstrate that a little bit of learning in groups can be a dangerous thing, producing what they call "a beginner's bubble" (p. 23). They identify a pattern in which novices at first show little confidence related to their ability to execute a new task. But these individuals quickly become confident as they become more familiar with the task even if their skill level doesn't increase, leading to overconfidence. They write:

> *As our participants gained experience and feedback with the tasks, their accuracy rose in an incremental and linear fashion. The confidence they expressed, however, was anything but linear [rising rapidly]. Across the studies, participants showed no overconfidence as they began, but … their confidence rose well beyond where their accuracy lay. However, that confidence soon leveled off as accuracy continued its steady rise. Accuracy never matched confidence, however. (p. 23)*

Thus, even with experience, some board members' confidence may outpace their competence. The result is an "I don't know what I'm talking about, but I'm going to tell you anyway" situation.

This pattern of a little knowledge being a dangerous thing is also illustrated in aviation. Research shows that novice pilots are cautious early on, but as they gain more experience and hours in flight, their risk of fatal crashes increases until they gain sufficient experience to match their confidence. This phenomenon has the unfortunate label of "the killing zone" (Craig, 2013; Knecht, 2013). Many board members also may face this beginner's bubble after a short period of orientation and socialization.

That said, overconfidence has been shown to make some positive organizational contributions, as well. New research of overconfident CEOs suggest that overconfidence leads to higher gross profitability and helps to create stronger commitments to organizations, with employees exhibiting lower turnover rates and greater ownership of company stock in benefit plans (Phua, Tham, Wei, 2017). Thus, regarding feelings of individual affect and loyalty, overconfidence has benefits. Overconfident leaders gain people's trust and commitment. Ultimately, though, the positives don't seem to outweigh the downsides.

The literature suggests the following propositions related to overconfidence:

> **Proposition 6.1:** Boards are at risk for overconfidence because they are made up of powerful people with strong track records who hold positions of status in and outside of universities;
>
> **Proposition 6.2:** Overconfidence in the boardroom might help the institution gain a stronger commitment to a course of action;
>
> **Proposition 6.3:** Board members who are overconfident can be perceived as competent

even when they are not;

Proposition 6.4: Overconfidence can grow when others corroborate ideas, even if those corroborations themselves are unfounded. When trustees tell a peer he or she is correct, that person is more likely to believe that to be the case even if the evidence suggests otherwise;

Proposition 6.5: Trustees will face a beginner's bubble in which confidence outpaces competence as it relates to new tasks.

Discussion

While it is speculation to say with certainty that the elements identified above are present in university boardrooms, the propositions seem plausible. University boards have been accused of being aloof and distant from campus (overconfident); not bringing their best talents and keen insights to the decisions they must make (hidden profiles and group polarization); not taking advice from faculty and administrators who have relevant expertise (high-powered groups); pursing their own agendas and not being willing to change (high-powered groups); being distracted by internal power battles; and constantly underperforming in their decision-making (hidden profiles; see for example, Chait, 2009; Chait, Ryan & Taylor, 2006; Trower, 2013). Plausibility, evident in the propositions, can be an important objective in the messy world of organizations and their processes, lending useful insight (Ancona, 2012; Weick, 1995) even if it is too early to be empirically examined.

The volume of propositions identified herein—20—suggests that governance is and should be expected to be difficult. The process losses lamented by Forbes and Milliken (1999) may be endemic to boards and their work in both corporate and academic settings. The range of challenges and their causes is great. Simple solutions are not likely to address all, if any, of these elements. There seem to be strategies that boards and their leaders can implement to address these shortcomings and difficulties. Interventions by board leaders may counter some of these natural tendencies that make governance challenging; however, these interventions may be different from those typically espoused.

Chait, Holland & Taylor (1993) identified six competencies of effective boards: contextual, educational, interpersonal, analytical, political, and strategic. These competencies can be expanded upon by including some of the propositions listed previously. For example, the board ensures that it is well informed (educational). One might speculate that, given the likelihood of overconfidence in the boardroom and the resistance to advice, even expert advice, creating a continually well-informed board is not easily accomplished. This review suggests that boards require more detail on how to become and remain well informed.

Chait, and colleagues (1993) argue that effective boards nurture their development as a group. This development may depend on the extent to which power is differentiated within the group, with equally powerful and unequal groups experiencing different development challenges, and how information is shared or not shared. Furthermore, high-powered teams struggle to work effectively as a group—pursuing individual agendas, not collaborating well, concerning themselves with status—and thus require more intentional if not altogether different approaches to group development.

AGB's president offers 10 habits of highly effective boards (Legon, 2014), but the research cited herein suggests that some of these habits may be more difficult to implement than the author conveys or do not address the real challenges of boards. For example, Legon calls for a culture of inclusion and of inquiry. But with high-powered individuals who are characterized as overconfident and for whom status matters, advice from low-status individuals is ignored, and creating an inclusive culture will not happen effortlessly if at all.

Legon further argues that effective board chairs are those who "support and facilitate a model for strategic governance, develop an essential and candid relationship with the chief executive officer, have the respect of his or her board colleagues, understand and respect academic culture, and ensure that the full board is focused on issues that matter" (p. 11). While possibly relevant, such chairs may rarely exist and may not help boards function better. Based on the research synthesized here, effective board chairs might be more successful in improving board performance by determining and leveraging the competence of individual trustees to minimize overconfidence; ensuring that unique information enters board discussions and shared knowledge does not dominate; being wary of group momentum that results in extreme decisions; limiting the number of tasks and issues to ensure less opportunity for individual interests to emerge; and drawing out divergent views rather than reinforcing the first view expressed on an issue. How board leaders structure discussions may also matter. On topics that may lead to extreme decisions (such as CEO compensation), chairs may be better served to have each board member decide privately, submit his or her responses, and then aggregate the decisions rather than have the group discuss the proposed compensation levels. Approaching different types of decisions through different decision-making strategies may be helpful.

Third, even acts such as delegating decision-making authority to committees per Legon's suggestion might be challenging. The research suggests that trustees may not heed advice well and are likely to pursue their own rather than the group's agendas. If some committees are perceived to be more powerful than others or are composed of the most-powerful trustees, the less-powerful committees may spend their time fighting for status. Finally, common governance tasks such as monitoring risk may be more difficult than acknowledged. Legon suggests that "boards should look at key challenges through the prism of risk" (p. 12). But boards that are marked by overconfidence are disinclined to consider risk and have members who are overly optimistic of their own abilities, do not pay sufficient attention to the environment, and are not open to advice. None of these bode well for a risk focus. Board leaders may need to push hard on the idea of risk to give the topic adequate attention and care.

Finally, a thread across this synthesis is the importance of board education and the difficulty of delivering on this well. Boards are made up of successful individuals from outside higher education. To govern well, they need to understand the university, its context, and governance (Eckel & Trower, 2019). Board education should be important and a priority. However, the review suggests that board members likely are predisposed to be overconfident in their abilities; spurn advice, even from experts; spend more time discussing common, shared information, rather than new knowledge; and get caught in a beginner's bubble in which confidence outpaces competence. These characteristics suggest that boards must make ongoing education and information a top priority even if they do not believe they need to. Board and administrative leaders may need to over-stress board education and information sharing. Boards may need to be overexposed to experts (whose status should be overemphasized) and then challenged to thoroughly discuss their advice rather than ignore, dismiss, or belittle it.

Implications for Research

This paper is an initial foray into literature not typically applied to board behavior; (Trower, 2013 is an exception but limited in scope). This paper suggests multiple lines of future inquiry. First, the propositions should be explored and tested empirically. Second, additional research can test the efficacy of the suggested responses. This synthesis of related literature has many limitations; the best way to address them is through empirical investigations. Boards, across sectors, are difficult to study (Daily, Dalton, & Cannella, 2003; Forbes & Milliken 1999), mostly because of access issues, but also because of concern for disruption to the board's work and the lack of time that boards have to do that work. However, difficulty should not be a deterrent but a challenge. Some of propositions may need to be investigated through case study and qualitative methods, but others may be better suited to quantitively inquiries, both in the field or in the lab.

Implications for Practice

The results of this inquiry also have implications for practice. First, board leaders might participate in new types of professional development programs. Board leaders who are familiar with the likely dynamics of board interactions and what they might mean in the boardroom can help them be more effective as they move their boards forward.

Second, boards can develop new habits and patterns of behavior that might minimize some of these elements. For example, boards might be better served when making decisions about presidential compensation or tuition levels by aggregating individual decisions rather than having a freewheeling discussion that might lead to extreme decisions (group polarization). Using note cards or web-based tools to collect people's opinions anonymously may limit cascade effects. The counter actions suggested previously are other examples.

Finally, the propositions outlined in this paper may suggest a different approach to board evaluation. For example, McKinsey's nonprofit board assessment instrument (McKinsey, 2017) asks individuals to respond to questions about core responsibilities and enablers of board effectiveness. It does not explore the preponderance of the issues identified here. AGB reports that its proprietary board assessment addresses mission and strategy, leadership and shared governance, institutional sustainability, educational quality, board performance, and board culture (AGB, 2016b). But it, too, is unlikely to capture the underlying issues identified here. Adding dimensions related to countering overconfidence, identifying competence, exploring decision-making bias, focusing agendas on a limited number of items, and overstressing board education (for those advice-avoiding and overconfident trustees) may be helpful dimensions to add.

Governance is difficult and nuanced. Boards need to understand their roles and responsibilities (AGB, 2018), but that charge falls well short of what might be the underlying causes of continued board difficulties. Most boards likely comprehend their roles. They are comprised of accomplished individuals with deep experience in organizations, often very complex ones. While they can continually tinker with or even overhaul their structures such efforts may help boards focus differently on issues (Association of Governing Boards, 2015c), but not address problems in overall board performance. Understanding possible dynamics that shape how boards decide may yield advice more helpful, steps more impactful, and new ways of working to ensure that boards add the value they can and should to the universities, colleges and state systems they govern.

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