

# “Govern Diligently”

Asia Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary

Board Devotional, April 2012

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“We have different gifts; according to the grace given to us...Iwpl it is leadership, let him govern diligently.” Romans 12:6-8b (NIV).

In the fascinating 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans, two words jump out at me as I think about governing boards of local churches, district and national boards, and the college, university, and seminary boards. The words from 12:8 are “govern diligently.”

What does it mean to “govern diligently? Outstanding Christians with oversight responsibility for Christian organizations, leaders with significant contributions to the ministries for which they are responsible, often ask a related question, “what is a “governing board?”

In various countries where I work with these oversight groups, I discover much ambiguity regarding board governance. Members want to make a positive impact to the boards to which they belong. These individuals and the boards on which they serve want to make a significant difference. They are thrilled to be asked to serve on a board of governance.

For many, the invitation provides an opportunity to be good stewards of the gifts, talents, education and experiences with which they have been blessed. Often, however, this excitement soon leads to frustration as the boards on which they serve - local churches, colleges, seminaries, universities, district and national boards, and ministry organizations - lack an understanding of the role, purpose, and structure of the board to required to “govern diligently.”

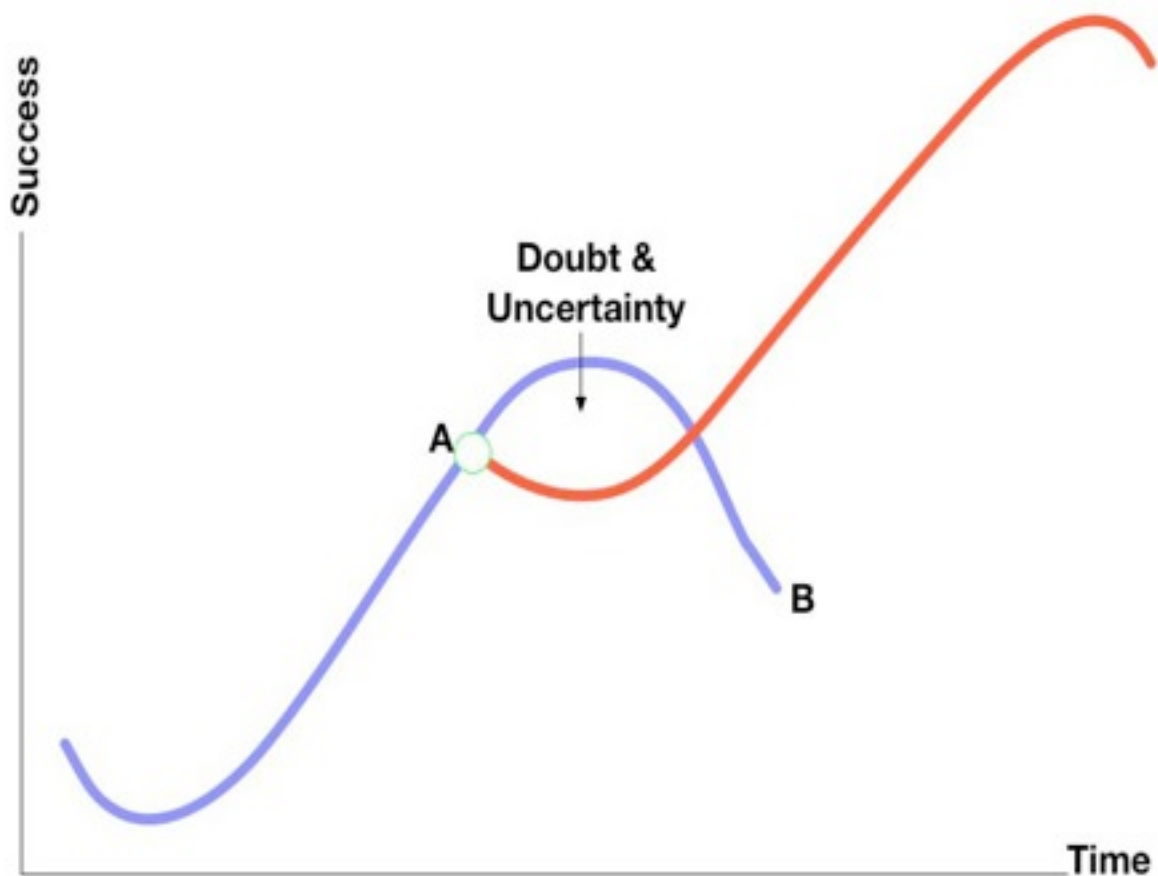
The big question regarding governing boards is this: “What should a local church, ministry organization, or seminary governing board **do** to be a strong and effective board who “governs diligently...and effectively?”

In a video recently produced on “Building Better Boards,” I define a governing board as... “

**“...an elected body that oversees the ministry and mission of a local church or ministry organization between annual membership meetings.” A governing board of a local church or a ministry organization “is guided by the Church *Manual* and/or ministry organization Bylaws and Articles of Incorporation,” and must insure that the legal documents and policy documents are up to date.**

Organizations, including local churches and ministry organizations, evolve and change. So must their governing boards. Strong and effective boards receive recommendations from the church or organization membership; boards also shape strategic recommendations for the full membership to consider. Strategic thinking, planning and implementation are key responsibilities of a governing board that “governs diligently.”

Review with me a modified Sigmoid or “S” curve. Understanding this cycle is critical for boards to govern the organization for sustained growth. Change is inevitable; problems arise in the transitions.



The vertical line on the left represents the “growth” line. The horizontal line at the bottom of the slide represents the “time” line, and can represent weeks, months, or years.

If organizations, including churches, continue to function as they did at the start of the local church or beginning of the ministry organization, then the growth will subside, and decline will begin. New “breakout” initiatives and vision are needed along the time line, even as growth is taking place! If not, the church or organization will soon plateau and eventually decline!

This board development segment focuses on the Asia Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary governing board. What new initiatives need to take place to increase the influence and impact of APNTS throughout the region, and to insure continued growth in the seminary enrollment?

Remember, change is inevitable – change in demographics, expectations, economics, technology, government, and education –just to name a few. Problems arise in the transitions. How do we adjust to the facts, context and trends we face in the changing community, country or region in which we work and serve?

Understanding transitions is important for the boards and the board chairs or leaders. The “Sigmoid Curve” helps us conceptualize inevitable change and necessary transitions in the higher education institutions, local churches or ministry organizations with whom we serve. It also applies to the APNTS board.

Let’s discuss these questions as seminary leadership and governing board?

1. Do graduate level theological seminaries go through numerical (and spiritual) cycles? Are the cycles inevitable? How do these schools regain momentum in the midst of cycles?
2. Where is the seminary in the cycle?
3. What should be the role of board and seminary leadership in this cycle, particularly at the transition points?

How we manage the transitions can facilitate or derail the increased influence and impact, and the expanded enrollment growth we so desperately need and envision for the seminary we love and serve.

Let me pause and share with you a foundational working assumption regarding my perspective on governing boards of faith organizations, especially local churches, and college and seminary boards.

## **“Strong Governing Boards Empower Effective Leaders.**

### **Strong Leaders Embrace Engaged Boards”**

Growing local churches, ministry organizations , and schools like the Asia Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary need strong and effective governing boards in order to identify new initiatives and clarify the vision needed for increased influence and impact, and for expanded enrollment growth. Otherwise, decline will be the result.

Strong board members are engaged. They ask thoughtful questions, but do not attempt to "micro-manage" the organization. They respect their leader because as an effective governing board they have nominated or elected the very strongest, "mission fit" leaders possible. These leaders know, communicate, make decisions, and submit recommendations to the board with a laser beam commitment to the organization's mission, vision, and values. They have earned the trust of their boards and work in cooperation with them.

Likewise, strong leaders “lead” by bringing out the best in board members, listening to them and providing significant opportunities for them to engage in the decision making process. These leaders are not intimidated by probing questions. They take time to process questions in need of answers; challenges in need of decisions. No “intentional” surprises by board members or board leaders. These leaders model a commitment to communicate with each other and address conflict situations as Christians.

To lead, and be effective as a governing board, means to function *appropriately* in the three modes of board governance: the FIDUCIARY mode; the STRATEGIC mode, and the REPRESENTATIVE mode. This means that the board has governance and coordinating responsibility for the seminary in at least the areas of:

- Mission and Vision clarity
- Financial health and legal standing

- Budget approval and oversight
- Curriculum consistency
- Doctrinal integrity
- Spiritual well-being of students, faculty and staff, and for
- Strategic thinking and planning.

Let's go deeper by asking several additional questions.

1. What *one* word would you use to characterize this board?
2. What are the major strengths of this board?
3. What is the most *critical issue or major concern* facing this board?
4. What *one board-related question* would you like answered during this board meeting?
5. Are the *legal documents* up to date, and readily available to board members?
6. What three *big ideas* should the Board focus on for the next three years?
7. What has *changed* significantly in the community, in the country or in the region to which the seminary must adjust and make appropriate transitions?

These “big questions” can only be asked and thoughtfully discussed if the board agenda has been intentionally developed. Guard the board agenda! Significant reports are important. So are the blocks of time needed to discuss the big questions facing the church, ministry organization, or seminary.

Don't back away from the big questions. Cultivate the discipline to “think questions.” Not just any questions. Strong and effective boards ask the *right* questions. The questions asked above are examples of basic, on-going questions that probe the big issues and help define the real problems.

Governing boards will shape the specific questions needed for a particular time and setting. Boards may not have immediate answers to the fiduciary, strategic,

or representative challenges before them. They must, however, have the *right* questions. And, in this process, they increasingly “govern diligently.”