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Developing and Maintaining a Unified Board

Setting expectations to monitor behavior and actions is critical to governance success

By Stan Bippus

One of the most difficult challenges any board faces is staying unified, focused, and operating in a positive manner. A school board cannot provide leadership unless board members trust each other and their superintendent. Trust levels cannot exist without open and honest communications.

Boards typically consist of individuals with different values, priorities, and expectations that, ideally, their fellow members will accept and respect. Respecting individual differences does not mean giving up or suppressing different viewpoints, however. Nor do personal differences and beliefs justify open and discourteous attacks on fellow board members, which is one of the quickest ways to destroy trust and the working relationship. When members “fight” with each other in public meetings, the credibility of the entire board suffers.

To build trust levels, board members and administrators must try to accept the fact that ideas or points of view can be challenged without being construed as personal attacks. Not taking a challenge or confrontation personally, however, is much easier said than done. Sadly, administrators and board members often lack the self-confidence to take criticism objectively and constructively. It is surprising how many individuals cannot handle honest feedback.

Such a glaring deficit, however, should not prevent you from making every effort to create an atmosphere where honesty and trust is expected. It is essential that board members sit down and identify how they expect each other to behave or respond. Otherwise, functioning as a team will be impossible.

List of expectations

It is essential that administrators and board members work together to develop an outline of how they will behave or deal with the various situations they will face. As an administrator for 30 years, I have developed a useful list of expectations to govern and monitor board behavior and actions.

- When voicing opposition to a motion or recommendation, board members will strive to direct their comments to the issue and not at an individual.
- When approached and asked to justify his/her position or vote on an issue, a board member will state his/her position and perhaps the rationale, but refrain from being critical of fellow members with opposing views.
- When approached about a concern, the board member will refer the individual to the board’s chain of command policy. This policy should encourage the individual to approach first the person at the source of his/her concern or the supervisor, then the superintendent and then the school board. Board members will not personally contact an employee about a problem or concern and will direct all such concerns through the superintendent.

- Board members will not try to influence a personnel decision outside a work session, executive session or board meeting.
- When visiting a school building or school event, a board member will not voice observed or learned concerns directly to building-level employees, but will direct concerns to the superintendent. Board members are strongly encouraged, however, to share positive observations with employees when visiting a school or attending an event.
- All members will make a sincere effort to acquire adequate knowledge about an action item on the agenda so they are comfortable making a decision at a scheduled meeting, but realizing the position may change after public comments and board discussion.
- No members will try to unfairly influence the position of others on the board on agenda items prior to a meeting. This does not preclude board members from sharing personal opinions on matters prior to meetings, work sessions, or public hearings, as long as everyone receives the same opinions.
- All topics discussed during executive/closed sessions are confidential and will not be discussed with anyone not attending the session.
- Board members will not try to add agenda items at a meeting without adequate prior discussion with other members and the superintendent. They also will not try to influence an upcoming decision through manipulation or by making deals with fellow board members and/or administrators. Doing so is micromanagement.
- Board members will try to avoid surprising the administration or fellow members by siding with or openly supporting special interest groups on agenda items.
- Board members will notify the superintendent of any rumors regarding possible power plays by special interest groups to influence an upcoming decision.
- Everyone will make a sincere effort to not add items to the agenda the day of a board meeting except in cases of extreme emergencies and with prior board knowledge. Non-action items will be placed on the agenda to provide members with the opportunity to identify whether they would like for them discussed or considered at a future meeting.
- Visitors to board meetings who wish to make written or oral comments to the board will be asked to write down their name and the issue. Board members will resist the temptation to respond to public comments except to take them under advisement or to thank the presenter for the comments.
- Board members will make a sincere effort to monitor themselves to insure they are not monopolizing the discussion on agenda items. When necessary, the board president will tactfully let a member know when he/she is monopolizing the conversation.
- At board meetings members should be aware that personal body language or sidebar conversations during discussion or oral testimony might be distracting or interpreted as lack of interest.

Other issues you will face

One area not covered in the preceding list is how to deal with issue of telephone calls that board members receive. Ideally, board members should discourage phone calls as the information they gather should be in open meetings where everyone has equal access to the information.

Every superintendent I know has dealt with a board member who says they have received several telephone calls supporting or opposing an issue. The problem is that the board member is usually vague. What are several telephone calls and who were the calls from?

Special interest groups commonly set up call lists to influence board members' decisions. Meanwhile, board members are reluctant to identify who called out of fear of offending the caller or losing their trust. However, doing this will cost you trust with your fellow board members and the administration. Input should be ignored when someone calls and refuses to identify who he or she is. It should also be ignored when board members will not share their source of information.

All of this will be ineffective words on a piece of paper if they are not reviewed as part of an annual assessment. It is difficult and challenging to get board members to do a self-assessment of their job performance in following a code of ethics. Most elected officials feel they are evaluated by the people they serve at the polls, not by themselves or anyone else. However, if members are unwilling to reflect on their actions, the odds are quite low that a board will ever be unified and working toward a common purpose or mission.

The self-assessment of these agreed-upon expectations should be completed privately, not at a work session or executive session. Once the individual assessments are completed, the board president should meet privately with each member to review them. Ideally, the working relationship between the superintendent and board president is at a high-enough level that they can share personal perceptions of the behavior of individual board members. This allows the board president to know what the superintendent's perceptions are when meetings are held with individual board members.

A board that is unified and working together in a positive and constructive manner takes a lot of compromise, commitment, and hard work. However, success at creating an effective board is a debt that everyone should be willing to pay to their constituents.

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