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Increasing Civility among Board Members

By Gary S. O'Malley

In February of 1963 I waited on a Monday morning with about 10 of my neighborhood friends for the school bus to take us to George Greenman Elementary School. It had snowed early in the weekend, but the weather was now warm enough for us to leave our winter coats at home and play in the melting ice and snow.

The snow was abundant, wet, and when warmed by the bare hand, perfect for packing as a snowball. A few of us threw snowballs against the trunk of the tree that provided the best shade in the neighborhood; it was a target that never moved and never complained. It kept me busy until Donnie dumped a chunk of ice over my head that traveled under my sweatshirt and down my back.

I saw him run about 10 feet away standing behind a third grade girl who was turned slightly sideways in my direction. Without thinking, I threw my best Whitey Ford fastball in Donnie's direction. At that very moment, the third grade girl turned toward me to catch that snowball right smack in her face. Over her shoulder I saw Donnie fall to the ground laughing as the school bus made its turn onto our street. The only sound I could hear was the third grader sobbing hysterically.

The bus driver was not amused. Despite my apologies to everyone present and the fact that two minutes later Donnie and the third grader seemed to have little recollection of what had just happened, I wondered if I still had a ride to school.

At the bus driver's direction, I entered the bus last and stood in the front of the bus during the trip "as a reminder of my mistake." Other students joined us at different stops along the way and I wondered whether the polite thing to do would be to exit or just turn and let them squeeze by. I let them squeeze by because I did not know if I would be let back on the bus.

Throughout the ride, the driver asked other students if I should be allowed to ride the bus tomorrow. I cried when the bus driver told me that my parents, teachers and principal should be told how I didn't care about anyone except myself.

As an adult, I know that public ridicule is not the best remedy to influence appropriate behavior. I realize that rules are created to provide safety, security and order in an unsafe, unpredictable and random world. I was guilty, repentant, humbled and miserable. That day, I realized my actions have consequences. I have never thrown another snowball at anyone since.

Board meetings are public displays of leadership designed to promote decision-making among adults. Board members are armed with words instead of snowballs and their wit, patience, poise and personality influence board proceedings. The truth is that some adults react comfortably and confidently to changing situations. Others are impatient, socially awkward and less likely to move from individual preferences toward common agreement.

An effective superintendent anticipates the outcomes of a spirited conversation necessary to resolve important issues publicly. An effective superintendent keeps the organization moving forward despite the unpredictable nature of adults and the unpredictable nature of change. An effective superintendent employs practical strategies for increasing the civility among board members by building a sense of community based on mutual respect and mutual benefit.

Strategies for increasing civility

An effective superintendent practices strategies for increasing civility among board members:

- Promote opportunities for each board member to make contributions. How do we demonstrate a genuine interest in understanding individual preferences and provide forums for these discussions?
- Provide resources that encourage dialogue and professional behavior. How do we use the work of others to reflect on the purpose of leadership, governance and accountability?
- Improve communication among board members. How might we reaffirm board protocol for communicating ideas? Who speaks at board meetings? Who listens? How do we balance our discussions so all are encouraged to contribute?
- Review board effectiveness regularly. How are issues resolved? What issues continue to resurface yet never get resolved? How long does it take to get things done?
- Model the character you expect from others. Do we work hard to get others to work hard? Do we avoid sarcasm and mean-spirited comments?
- Anticipate conflict. Do we manage conflict or work to avoid it?

It is important that school board members grow professionally and emerge as educational leaders. One test of board leadership is to consider how board decisions are deliberated. Another test is to examine whether board members can define examples of mutual benefit. A final test is to ask board members to describe examples of how board actions demonstrate mutual respect among members during public forums.

Practicing civility

Civility, like the weather, changes constantly and is difficult to predict. Nevertheless, it is important to measure those variables that influence the size and strength of the next storm. To gauge a sense of civility, a superintendent should consider whether the following conditions are likely to be met at board meetings:

1. The treatment of others will be transparent and genuine.
2. We will model civility through dialogue and disagreement.
3. Communication precedes judgment.
4. Influence comes from a pattern of being truthful, accurate and credible.
5. Confrontation is welcomed as an opportunity to test influence and judgment.

Building a community of educational leaders

Imagine a preface in your board handbook that reads something like this: "We expect that we will have problems at our board meetings schools sometime this school year. Someone will get angry, frustrated or upset about the behavior of another. Someone will have reason to be upset,

anxious or displeased. At those times, we ask that you take a deep breath and consider ways to improve the situation for all concerned.”

Silly, perhaps, when we know we are dealing with well-intended adults who are pledged to service over self. Yet, necessary, as a reminder that these actions are public and these decisions have consequences. In most cases, policies set standards for behavior that guide future decisions. Unfortunately, no policy can anticipate the unusual context of human interactions: interpretation and evaluation are necessary evils for understanding the human condition.

In this context, experience and wisdom are not the same. Instead, the evaluation of board behavior is based on interpretation of its appropriateness in a given context. Educators must welcome such scrutiny. Interpretations about what is important should change based on a greater understanding of situation and circumstance.

It is the responsibility of the superintendent to revisit the idea of community regularly throughout the school year, in and out of board meetings, both to reaffirm a positive sense of connection among individuals and to invite discussion about ways to increase opportunities for the board to demonstrate its concern for collective decision-making.

Some board members will refuse to minimize their individual desire to remedy every situation. Some board members will never learn to appreciate the annoying behavior of a fellow board member. Some board members will demand that their board service be used for personal or professional gain.

As superintendent, you must move beyond these selfish interests by modeling the character and integrity you hope will surface among those you represent. When it does, it will overwhelm you with the positive nature of people and reinforce the beauty of a system where those outside the profession can lead with sincerity and affection. When it disappoints, and it will, it is be a sad reminder of how impossible it is to control or predict the fragility of human interactions.

Somewhere someplace a fifth-grader is about to make a mistake. Board members have a vested interest in this scenario by deciding which part they wish to play: bus driver, Donnie, spectator, victim or perpetrator. Most likely, board members will play each of these different roles at some time during their board service.

As individuals, the important lessons of civility include the empathy we learn from each life experience. As board members, our collective response to circumstances becomes our attempt to connect as a community, responsible for articulating, defending and documenting board actions completed for the benefit of others. Done well, we demonstrate our commitment to model the civility we expect from others.

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