

Board & Administrator

FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

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Rumors have no place in the superintendent's evaluation

Washington state school board consultant Bob Hughes would like to change the paradigm on one key issue with superintendent evaluation: communicating board concerns directly to the superintendent when trustees have heard a rumor.

Many successful people who run organizations may have difficult-to-work-for personalities, Hughes said, which can ruffle feathers and lead to sniping and backbiting.

"When I worked at Boeing, I evaluated plenty of professionals," Hughes said. "They all liked to hear

firsthand about any problems with their performance."

The same principle should apply to trustee's negative comments about the superintendent's performance, as well as scuttlebutt that board members may hear about how she interacts with others, Hughes said. "If you can't say what you are hearing in front of other board members, don't say it," he said. "If the superintendent is not there to hear the board members' comments on her performance, they are rumors." ■

Sharpen up your board meetings

Long meetings are the bane of school boards. They crush enthusiasm, drain energy, and create boredom.

That's why a board and its president need to learn ways to manage discussion and move school business along efficiently. Here are some tips:

1. Keep the discussion flowing. If Jim gets stuck on a topic, the president can say "Thanks, Jim. We know where you stand. I'd like to hear from Cindy now."

2. Be aware of the non-verbal indicators of boredom. When the president notices them, it's time to move the issue under discussion along.

3. If consensus comes early, it's time for the vote.

4. Post-meeting debriefings can prevent future problems. When you have a dominant-personality

board member or even one with great passion for board service, she can monopolize meetings. The president can meet with this individual after the meeting, thank her for her input, and ask for her assistance in keeping meetings to a reasonable length.

5. Consider a timed agenda. Persistent problems in the area of meeting length are an issue that cries out for resolution. By estimating time lengths for each agenda item, the board puts itself on notice that time must be used productively. Ask your superintendent and board president to work out times allotted to each agenda item when they create the agenda. This time-monitoring tool will also give the president the ammunition she needs to end discussion and call for a vote. ■

'Wander around in the weeds' and expect some pushback from the superintendent

When a board member tries to do the staff's job, he is telling the superintendent: "I don't trust you."

This mindset will always damage the working relationship a board member has with the administrator.

This is why it is vital that board members respect the principle of board oversight. In a nutshell, this means the full board is the only entity that can issue directives to the superintendent, not an individual trustee.

If the individual board member doesn't have the votes on an issue, he doesn't have the authority to take an end-run around the full board to the superintendent so that he can get his way.

Trying to interfere in such a way is classic micromanagement. Think of it like this: When you as a board member have agreed not to do something and then you step in and do it anyway after the board and superintendent have discussed roles, you are heading into the weeds. ■

Retreat activity: Board team writes a member job description

Too many board members come to school board service with very little understanding of the requirements of the job. This leads to questions: Do I hire teachers? Do board members give instructional advice to teachers? Do I approve spending decisions?

An effective way to clarify the board's job (and the responsibilities of the individual school board member) is to write a job description for the board.

This way, the board can define, for itself and all future school board members, exactly what the board should be doing.

As a full-board activity in a retreat setting with your superintendent, try to write a school board job description for your own board. Alternatively, the board might ask a committee to come up with a draft job description for board review.

Set down your board's responsibilities under these categories:

- Legal.
- Duties.
- Roles.
- Time commitments (meetings, committee service, district event attendance, continuing education requirements).

The board does itself and the community a great service when it gives thought to these issues, because it not only commits itself to operating effectively but creates a tool that will assist future board members in mastering the position when they are elected for the first time. ■

8 rules for avoiding board meeting conflict

1. Be informed. It's the only way to argue your views professionally.
2. Don't give rumors the same weight as facts and data.
3. Don't try to do the staff's job.
4. Avoid acting defensive. Remain calm.
5. Listen; seek first to understand.

6. Use a recess to calm tempers and soothe frayed nerves.

7. Stay on topic. The agenda has been prepared with board members' time in mind.

8. Mind your manners. Board members who monopolize the meeting can sap the board's energy. The chair should ensure all board member views are heard. ■