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# Terrible Habit #9

## Speak for the Board

### **Thursday 5:00 p.m., Spring Sing at Grandview School**

It is 5:00 p.m. on Thursday, and you are standing in the amphitheater at Grandview School waiting for the annual Spring Sing to begin. As parents and children take their positions on the well-worn bleachers, you smile and say hello to everyone who looks your way, feeling very much the dignitary. As you look around the crowd, you notice that you are the only school board member who accepted Principal Alicia Alton's invitation to attend. As you continue to look around, you also do not see the superintendent or anyone from her staff. It looks like you are representing the board.

The principal steps up to the podium, and a hush falls over the audience. She welcomes everyone to Grandview's Spring Sing and then says, "Before we get started, let's welcome Richard Richland over here, representing our school board. Richard, can you come up and say a few words?"

You smile and wave and walk to the podium, wondering what you are going say. You had no idea that you would be asked to speak, but you see this as a good opportunity to communicate with the community. Besides, you are beginning to enjoy your newfound role of special dignitary.

"Thank you, Principal Alton, for inviting me to this wonderful event at Grandview School. I want you all to know that the school board is committed to helping all children in the district reach their potential through an enriching instructional program that includes the arts."

That sounds a bit too abstract, you think to yourself, so you add, "We on the school board are committed to providing increased funding for music, expanding the band program, and in the near future we want to build a new auditorium here at Grandview for events like this Spring Sing." These are all goals that you have had in mind for a long time as a board member, so it made sense to share them with the audience. For this masterful (in your opinion) speech, you receive light applause along with a handshake from the principal, and the program promptly moves on.

Feeling somewhat let down, you console yourself with the observation that these folks came to see their kids perform, not to hear some political speech. As you sit through the performance, you begin to wonder whether you said the right thing. Of course you did, you tell yourself, and besides, no one was really listening anyway.

## Plan B

Did something go wrong here? You had good intentions to support the folks at Grandview School, but some of what you wound up saying was not really appropriate for several reasons.

First, you led the audience to believe that you spoke for the board. Your first sentence was entirely appropriate because it is a paraphrase of the district's mission statement, approved by the board at a special meeting last year. However, in your second sentence you said that the board supports specific proposals, such as increasing funding for the arts, expanding the band program, and building an auditorium. Although the board has discussed some of those issues, it has not taken a stand on any of them. Even though you personally support them (at least in the abstract), they do not constitute the board's position.

Second, on the pragmatic level, you misused your little moment of fame by trying to turn a festive event into a political speech. Certainly, what you say in your political speeches is up to you, but you might want to keep in mind that the main focus of this event is on the kids' performances rather than your political aspirations.

What should you have said? Place a check mark next to the correct answer.

- ☐ Nothing. Just stand up and wave. At least you show support for the school by attending.
- ☐ Just say the first sentence. It represents the board's stand, and it is short.

- \_\_\_\_\_ Say both sentences, but preface the second one by mentioning that it is your opinion rather than the board's opinion.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Say both sentences, and add a few more.

Your best Plan B is Option 2. It allows you to say hello and represent the district in a low-key way. Option 1 is not quite right, because Principal Alton specifically asked you to say something; it would seem rude to just stand up and wave. Option 3 is an improvement over what you said because you try to say that you do not speak for the board, but the audience might still see you as a representative of the board despite your brief disclaimer. Also, you are still misusing a festive event to make a political minispeech, which probably is not going to be appreciated by the audience you wanted to impress. Option 4 is subject to the same criticisms of your original little speech but even more so.

## **Lessons Learned: Don't Speak for the Board Without Authority to Do So**

You may be asking yourself, "Do I have to watch every word I say?" The answer is yes when you are standing before the public as a representative of the district. Certainly, you have the right to say whatever you like, but you do not have the right to imply that you speak for the board. As a board member, you have a right and indeed an obligation to express your opinions at board meetings and beyond, but as a representative of the board, you must walk a very fine line when you communicate with the public. The board's position is what the majority of the board votes for—and when you are perceived as a representative of the board, your job is to represent the board's position. If you want to speak to the public as an individual, you can avoid being a terrible school board member by making clear that you are not representing the board.

## **Superintendents' Lessons Learned**

Part of the cause of this problem was that no one from the district office was at the event, so the principal turned to a school board member to represent the district. If the superintendent (or another central office administrator) had been there, the principal probably would have called on her to say a few words, sparing the school board member an unexpected moment of fame. It is also clear that the

principal needs some training in recognizing school board members events, and such training is under the superintendent's purview. For example, it probably would be best to arrange in advance (and with very clear parameters) if a school board member is expected to speak at a school event. In short, the superintendent contributed to the school board member's terrible performance—but, of course, that is not an excuse for it.

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# Terrible Habit #10

## Build Coalitions

### **After the Board Meeting, Anna's Pub**

It was a fairly short board meeting tonight, and to celebrate an early adjournment, you invite a fellow board member, Zeke Zimmerman, to have a beer with you at a nearby pub. This is a common scenario because you and Zeke have formed an informal coalition on the board, especially when it comes to budget issues. Sometimes, you even invite the superintendent.

Once seated in a cozy booth at Anna's Pub, you and Zeke analyze some of the recent agenda discussions and how you were able to steer the votes to your side.

"Let's drink to good votes!" you say, and so you do.

You and Zeke plot out your strategy on an upcoming vote to increase the budget reserve, an issue that both of you strongly support. You sketch out your arguments in favor of your motion to increase the reserve, and you line up counterarguments to every possible argument against it. You determine which other board members are most likely to be persuaded to vote your way, and you decide that you will call one of them and Zeke will call the other one.

"Al will never go for it, so let's not waste our time calling him," you say. "Besides, if we call him, he'll just get started on figuring out how to attack us at the meeting." You both clink your mugs and drink to excluding your fellow board member, Al Altman, from your coalition.

## Plan B

You might think you are a fine politician, wheeling and dealing to get your most important motions passed. Your behind-the-scenes coalition-building activities will lead to smoother meetings, better decisions, and less fumbling around in front of the public.

What could be wrong with deciding what is best for district and then making sure the vote goes your way?

When I look at this situation, I get nervous (and not just about the potential for a drunk driving arrest). In my state, it is against the law for school board members to line up votes outside of a public meeting. Even if it were not against the law, you are doing the public a disservice by essentially holding a public school board meeting in private at a booth at Anna's Pub or on the telephone. In shutting out the public, you are exhibiting the habits of a terrible school board member.

Please check a better plan from the options listed below.

- \_\_\_ Meet at a coffee shop rather than a pub.
- \_\_\_ Invite all the board members to come to the after-the-meeting get-together.
- \_\_\_ Continue your tradition of meeting with Zeke after meetings, but don't talk so much about school board issues.
- \_\_\_ Never talk about school board business to anyone outside of a school board meeting.

Option 1 is an improvement over your current practice, if for no other reason than that you are less likely to find your name in the police blotter for drunk driving. However, if you continue to use your private meetings for coalition building with other board members, you are still engaging in a terrible habit.

Option 2 is a nice gesture, and it can be useful for the board to get together for a free-ranging conversation. However, a trip to a pub after a board meeting is likely to give the public the impression that decisions affecting their kids are being made behind closed doors late at night with the aid of some of Anna's finest brews. This is the way terrible school board members can destroy the community's confidence in public education. More acceptable venues for informal discussion among school board members are school board conferences, workshops, and retreats that are open to the public.

In Option 3, you maintain your bad habit, though in reduced form. The fact remains, however, that you are still engaging in a terrible habit.

Option 4 is not a good move, either, because it prevents you from talking with your constituents, gathering information from staff members, or even responding to the news media.

Overall, none of the options constitutes a respectable Plan B. Your Plan B should be to avoid lobbying fellow board members for their votes outside of scheduled board meetings.

## **Lessons Learned: Conduct the Public's Business in Public**

When you seek to conduct the public's business through backroom wheeling and dealing (or even in a cozy booth at Anna's Pub), you are well on your way to becoming a terrible school board member. Unlike board members of many other organizations, school board members are expected to conduct the public's business in public (at least in my state). You may have been on other boards or committees where it was perfectly respectable (or even expected) to build coalitions by having private meetings in advance of a board meeting. Public school boards are different, so you need a different mind-set. Your main working premise should be that the public deserves to know what board members think and to see the board's decision-making process in action. It is one thing to stand in the parking lot after a board meeting and discuss vacation plans with fellow board members, but it is quite another to ask what it would take for a fellow board member to vote your way on an upcoming issue. In places where behind-the-scenes wheeling and dealing is illegal, you would be breaking the law to engage in coalition building—never a good tactic for school board members. In places without clear closed-meeting laws, your coalition-building activity simply would constitute terrible boardsmanship.

You might also want to consider the implications of your coalition-building activity for the ability of the board to function as a team. How do you think Al will feel when he finds out you have been conspiring behind his back to exclude him from the board's decision-making process? You can damage your working relations with other board members when you engage in coalition building that excludes them.

## **Superintendents' Lessons Learned**

What should Debbie do if she is asked by board members to go for a drink after a board meeting? Informal meetings with board members can help build rapport, but they should not be used to strategize about building a coalition to get a motion passed. If the superintendent decides to accept the invitation, she might want to make sure that the district credit card is not also invited. In general, socializing with board members is certainly not a forbidden activity, but it is one that requires a lot of tact. Board members can be a jealous lot, so the superintendent needs to avoid the appearance of showing favoritism—especially if she really does prefer certain board members. Debbie's best approach is to maintain a consistent policy of equal treatment of all board members, especially when it comes to discussing district business.