

# BOARDSMANSHIP

MAY 2016

## TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

It is imperative that the school board members, themselves, are able to work well together. This does not translate into board members all being good friends and agreeing on all issues that come before them. It does mean that every board member must be willing to listen to all viewpoints and sometimes support a decision with which they disagree. It is healthy for school board members

differing issues. By differing view, it is

THE EFFECTIVE BOARD MEMBER MONITORS HIS OR HER BEHAVIOR

to have opinions on having points of more likely

that all the pros and cons will be weighed before a final decision is made. However, it is within this process where most school boards' effectiveness breaks down. The two most important and absolutely necessary characteristics that a board member needs to be successful are:

- A willingness to discuss an opposing point of view in a respectful manner
- The ability to support a decision on which they voted in the minority

These characteristics can be achieved if board members agree that their collective goal is to make decisions in the best interest of their students. That requires putting aside any personal differences in order

## LEADERSHIP

- **One measure of leadership is the caliber of people who choose to follow you.** Peers
- **Leadership is a potent combination of strategy and character. But if you must be without one, be without the strategy.** Schwarzkopf
- **Effective leadership is putting first things first. Effective management is discipline, carrying it out.** Covey
- **Leadership is practiced not so much in words as in attitude and in actions.** Geneen
- **Leadership is an opportunity to serve. It is not a trumpet call to self-importance.** Walters

to work together. When board members are able to do that, often times common ground is established and a mutual respect is fostered in the board room.

Board members must be willing to discuss their views in an open, honest and respectful manner. Different issues will be addressed by board members with varying degrees of open-mindedness. Even the board member who has a high level of familiarity with and/or strong opinion about an issue must be willing to listen to others and discuss their own view with the other board members. There is a great deal of value in discussing opposing viewpoints even when the eventual outcome is evident. Board members are not only learning about the issue at hand but are also learning about their colleagues.

Perhaps the more difficult of the two traits for a board member to demonstrate is to support a board decision that they voted against. If not handled well, boards can become split and dysfunctional when this occurs. In this case, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Individual board member training and whole board development sessions can address this issue before it happens at a board meeting. And it will happen at a board meeting, eventually. Depending on the nature of the topic, a board member who votes in the minority may choose either:

- a) fully support the decision of the board, or
- b) fully support the process and respect the decision of the board

An example of when a board member should fully support the board's decision might be a vote to hold a bond election or changing school boundaries. On the other hand, there may be times when a board member chooses to support the process and respect the decision of the board. Issues that can become highly emotional such as an attendance policy or health curriculum may fall into this category. In this scenario, a board member may hold onto their belief but voice support for the process and the ultimate decision of a majority of the school board members. As long as the board member honestly feels that they are acting in the best interest of the students, they should vote their conscience but be willing to respect that they are only one vote. Under no circumstance is it tolerable to counteract the work of the board once a decision has been reached.

Board members also have a responsibility to keep the superintendent informed of their concerns. However, bringing them up for the first time at a board meeting is not an

appropriate method. After having discussed a topic of concern with the superintendent, it may be appropriate to bring it up during a public meeting. It may only be a matter of the superintendent or administrator being prepared with the facts to answer the concern in public.

At times, some board meetings may sound more like a World War II movie being rerun in a school setting. These meetings may resemble textbook cases of behaviors that school board members shouldn't display. In these situations, board members can quickly find themselves focusing on narrow interests and becoming involved in virtually everything they shouldn't be involved in.

We should be able to see the problem in these kinds of situations very easily. After all, when students who are representing the school district display unacceptable behavior in full view of the public, they are criticized and often administered punitive consequences.

Likewise, we must consider the way we behave in public. We must remember that we serve as role models for the young people in our community – and that actions speak louder than words. When examining our own behavior, we may find it useful to ask ourselves whether we would want the boys' and girls' basketball team - or any group of young people - to observe our board meetings. To make it more likely that we avoid questionable and negative board meeting behavior, let's reflect on our actions and those of our colleagues and then grade ourselves against the following standards.


- Every board member should refrain from making comments that label him or her as a "single issue" member who tends to the interests of one area of the district or a single area of focus that is caught a personal fancy.
- The board should develop strategies to eliminate the need for arguing and wrangling over minute details and publicly trading votes to achieve objectives.
- Board members should watch their nonverbal language and avoid conveying negative messages by means of facial expressions or walking out when dissatisfied with a discussion or a board decision.
- All board members should be careful not to leak information from executive sessions. If there is a question as to whether or not an item is public information the superintendent or legal counsel should be consulted.

- Every board member must make sure presentations receive the full attention they deserve and must refrain from working or visiting with others during discussions or presentations.
- Every board member must treat each other and the superintendent, and administrators with dignity and respect – refraining from publicly belittling – or purposely asking questions to embarrass other members or the administrative staff. Disrespectful behavior and the misuse of questions will quickly be tagged by astute audiences as “playing the crowd.”
- Board members must refrain from publicly making individual requests of administrative team members.
- Board members must be careful not to ask questions for which answers are available in the packet of materials distributed with the agenda. Furthermore, when board members distribute, through the packet, any materials they have obtained from some other source, they should take care to identify each source.
- Board members with school-age children should avoid frequent references to how a particular issue is likely to affect their own children. Rather, board members must remember that they represent all children.

Unfortunately, the negative side of these behaviors may surface during board meetings. When that happens, it's essential that the situation be corrected immediately. In addition to undermining the board's productivity, such behaviors tarnish the image of the board, the superintendent, and the district. Public meetings should reflect the teamwork and collaboration that exist among board members and between the board and the superintendent.

Effective board members know that it is important to routinely and regularly assess their public behavior. They know that a good tool for such an assessment is this question: Would we want an athletic team, the debate team, the band, or any other student group that represents our schools to observe the board's behavior? They realize that young people will probably follow the behaviors they observe. In essence, that's why it is doubly important for board members to behave in an acceptable manner.

Effective board members understand that although irresponsible, unprofessional behavior is not characteristic of the majority of school boards in North America, the seeds for it exist in virtually every school district. Unfortunately when the seeds sprout, board leadership breaks down and the interests of students take a back seat. Remember, what we say in board meetings and how we conduct business and solve problems becomes a model – for good or ill – for students, teachers, parents and staff throughout the district.

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1. Do not surprise the board or the superintendent at a board meeting. Sudden surprises should be the exception, not the rule. First, talk with the board chair or the superintendent. Ask to place an item on the agenda instead of bringing it up unexpectedly at the meeting.
  2. Remember that individual board members do not have authority. Only the board as a whole has authority. An individual board member should not take unilateral action.
  3. How you conduct yourself at a meeting is very important. Avoid words and actions that create a “bad show”, especially when they could make the board look bad. Don’t be afraid to make your point, but do it with a carefulness that won’t escalate negative impressions or incidents.
  4. Follow your policies, procedures, rules and regulations. Follow the chain of command and insist that others do so. Listen to your constituents and staff, but refer them to the person who can properly address their issue (the teacher, principal, superintendent). The last stop, not the first, should be the board.
  5. Do not react to threats. Neither “cave in” nor “dig in.” Deal with the issue, not the threat.

6. Do not be a “ball carrier” for others. Let others present their own issues, problems or proposals.
7. Do not make assumptions. Get the facts and the information. Ask questions to obtain more knowledge.
8. Do not play to the audiences. Your audience should be your fellow board members. Address them. Speak to the issues on the table.
9. Make motions so that the focus is on the actions. Avoid situations in which everyone is talking about a subject without a clear focus on the motion or final action.
10. “Move the question” (let us vote) when the discussion is repetitive. The board meeting is a place for actions, i.e., decisions and votes, not for endless discussion.
11. Police yourself. The board should take care of its own problems by a yearly self-evaluation and by addressing itself to any individual problems, such as poor attendance or leaks of confidential information.
12. Be sensitive to hidden agendas or motives. Be deliberate (you are a deliberative body) and careful so you do not do anything that creates an unwanted precedent or is the first step toward undesired policies.
13. Keep it short and simple. Make your point in as few words as possible. There should be very few speeches at a board meeting.
14. Follow policy. If the policy is old and outdated, then change it. Do not regularly take actions that violate your own policies.

15. Avoid long meetings. If lengthy meetings are the rule, ask that the board address this problem and take action to correct its practices.
16. Do your homework. Read and study your agenda and backup information. Call the superintendent or board president with any questions you have. If you don't have enough information, ask for more.
17. Avoid overuse of "closed" or "executive" sessions. While these sessions have a purpose, they should be held only when necessary. Open, public meetings should not have regular "closed" sessions.
18. Support and help your board president in his/her role as leader and presiding officer. S/he has a very tough job.
19. Ask for the superintendent's recommendations before you act. The superintendent is your chief executive officer and should recommend/propose/suggest on most matters. The superintendent proposes; the board disposes.
20. Keep cool. "Loose cannons" do not help a board function well. *How you conduct yourself is as important as what you do and say.*



*This information was compiled from articles by Michael L. Kremer, Debbie Jamrogiewicz, and the ISBA date unknown.*

