
Terrible Habit #1

Humiliate a District Employee in Public

7:21 p.m., Item 5B

It is 7:21 p.m. on the first Thursday of the month—not quite an hour into the board meeting—and the board has just moved on to Item 5B on the discussion agenda. The item is a four-page report from Linda Lesko, the assistant superintendent for special education, on the district's preschool program. Linda gives a brief and somewhat disorganized summary of the report, closing with an offer to "answer any questions the board might have."

You start to squirm in your seat. When you read the report several days ago, you were bothered by the number of typos (five by your count), the number of misspelled words (four by your count), and the many ungrammatical phrases and sentences, including two that were not sentences at all (i.e., "More to come in my next report" and "So goes another year"). To make matters even worse, the numbers in the table do not add up correctly, making you question whether the report is based on correct information. In your view, the report is completely unprofessional and reflects poorly on the district. You remember that your initial reaction to reading the report was dismay.

As you listen to Linda's summary and reread your handwritten notes on the report, you begin to feel tension building up inside. You feel let down by the district leadership, and that disappointment is beginning to turn into anger. How could Linda write such a sloppy report, knowing that it would be distributed to the public both at a

board meeting and on the district's website? How could the superintendent, Debbie Dineson, have allowed this report to go forward? How could your fellow board members be so complacent? Did anyone actually bother to read the report?

The mix of emotions is making your heart beat faster, and you look around to see if your fellow board members are going to say anything about the sloppiness of the report. The board president, Al Altman, calls on a board member, who asks a few polite questions. This apparent contentment with the report makes you feel even angrier, and you know you just have to say something.

"Richard, do you have any questions for Linda?" the board president asks, looking over to you. With your heart pounding and your temperature rising, you hold up the little report that is the object of your frustration and say, "Did anyone bother to actually proofread this document? It's full of typos and grammatical errors. It reflects very poorly on our district. If a student handed in a report like this, the grade would be an F."

A hush falls over the room. Linda sinks in her chair and looks away. The superintendent chimes in with, "Can you please give us the edits you are suggesting? We will be glad to make the corrections. We want to have professional reports that we all can be proud of."

The discussion moves on, but you are not really listening. You are wondering, "Did I just do something wrong? Was I being a good school board member?" You tell yourself that your motives were pure; all you wanted was what is best for district, which in this case means that public reports should look professional. You did not set out to humiliate anyone, but as you replay the event in your mind, you wonder if Linda and Debbie might feel that you humiliated them in public.

Plan B

What else could you have done? Please put a check mark next to the action (or actions) that make the most sense:

- You could have dropped the issue because it will end up being more trouble than it is worth.
- You could have contacted Linda directly to tell her to correct the errors you found.
- You could have contacted the superintendent with your complaints.

- ___ You could have contacted your fellow board members with your complaints.
- ___ You could develop a review procedure for releasing district reports so something like this does not happen in the future.
- ___ No, by gosh, you were right in the first place, and you should have the courage to stick by your convictions. Linda and Debbie deserved to be called out for that unprofessional report.

If you checked the third option, you are thinking like an effective school board member. The first option will not work, because you honestly believe that it is not in the best interests of the district to ignore something that needs to be fixed. The second option seems to make sense, but it violates the chain of command in the district. You are not Linda's supervisor. Your point of contact as a board member is the superintendent. This is the only person the board hires, fires (hopefully not), and evaluates. When you have a complaint about an administrator, teacher, or classified employee, you should direct your complaint to the superintendent. Of course, if your concern is routine, and you have a good working relationship with the employee (such as a school principal), and the superintendent does not object, then a quick conversation with the employee can be in order.

The third choice is Plan B—a backup plan that is really your best course of action. You can meet with the superintendent (or even just talk with her by telephone) to show her why you are not satisfied with the report. It is best to stick with the facts—in this case, pointing out the typos, misspellings, and inappropriate wordings. Rather than focusing only on what's wrong, you might also want to discuss ways that the superintendent ensures review of important district documents. It is then the superintendent's responsibility to work with Linda and, if necessary, to forge a better procedure for reviewing district reports. Hopefully, the superintendent will be able to satisfy you that the problem is being addressed appropriately. If you don't like the way she handles it, this can become an element in the superintendent's evaluation, and you can even ask to have an agenda item that addresses the policy aspects of your concern—such as the district's procedure for review of documents prior to release.

Option 4 is a poor choice because it violates the principle that the public's business should be done in public. If you feel the need to discuss with your fellow board members the district's procedure for reviewing reports prior to release, then you will need to request an agenda item on this issue.

Option 5 might seem like a reasonable approach, but it comes under the heading of micromanaging—in this case, usurping the superintendent’s job. It is certainly legitimate to ask the superintendent to describe the district’s procedure and to ask about ways to improve it, but it is not your responsibility as a board member to actually write the procedure for her. If you are not satisfied with the district’s procedure, then an agenda item is in order so the board can discuss the procedure and give direction as a board to the superintendent.

The final option was a bad idea when you executed it at the board meeting, and it remains a bad idea in retrospect. Leadership by humiliation is the hallmark of a terrible school board member.

Lessons Learned: Never Humiliate a District Employee in Public

Never humiliate a district employee in public. Such tactics reflect badly on you as a school board member and can be seen as a form of bullying. Such tactics can poison your relations with district employees, which will greatly diminish your effectiveness as a school board member. Such tactics are generally not very effective, as some people tend to dig in their heels when they feel attacked. Such tactics even raise legal issues about the confidentiality of evaluations of district employees.

Superintendents’ Lessons Learned

Could Superintendent Debbie Dineson have done anything to prevent the school board member’s terrible episode? First, she could have made sure that safeguards were in place for review of all materials going to the board before they are sent off. Even a cursory internal review would have detected the need for revisions in Assistant Superintendent Linda Lesko’s report. Given Linda’s reputation for sometimes releasing reports that are not quite ready for prime time, the superintendent should have made sure a review process was in place. In addition, the superintendent may have to do a better job of monitoring Linda’s performance. If Linda is unable to write satisfactory reports, she should be relieved of that duty or even relieved of her position. Second, the superintendent could work on creating rapport with board members so they will feel free to let her know

before the meeting if they receive substandard materials in the board packet. In this way, the superintendent can provide corrected versions of the material at the meeting, or at least handle the matter informally outside the meeting. Third, perhaps the superintendent could have practiced faster first aid at the meeting by interrupting the board member before he worked himself up into a tirade. The matter could have been controlled if the superintendent had been a little quicker to acknowledge the need to get the board member's corrections and bring a more polished version of the report back to the board at a later meeting. Part of the superintendent's job is to help prevent board members from looking bad, and in this case there is plenty of room for improvement.

Terrible Habit #2

Negotiate for the District

Saturday Afternoon Call, 1:02 p.m.

You are enjoying a cup of coffee at your kitchen table on a leisurely Saturday afternoon, when promptly at 1:02 p.m. your cell phone rings with a call from Penny Pinkstaff, the president of the teacher's union and a beloved former teacher of your daughter.

"Hi, Penny," you say. "It's good to hear from you."

"Hi, Richard; I hope I'm not interrupting your weekend."

"Not at all. What can I do for you?" you ask in your sincerest voice.

"Well, I'm hesitant to complain, but I want you to know that the superintendent is not being very cooperative with us. We have asked her repeatedly to stop the practice of having teachers work on the playground during recess when the yard duty monitor is absent. We've been trying to get that provision out of our contract in our current negotiations, but she just digs in her heels and says she needs the flexibility to call on teachers to work on the playground when the regular yard duty personnel aren't available. She won't even bring the issue to the board."

As you listen, you think about the fact that the teacher's union endorsed you when you ran for the school board. The union paid for your campaign flyers and organized its members to walk through neighborhoods distributing them. You probably would not have been elected without the union's support. You can see that this issue

of playground duty is important for teachers, and you want to help them.

"Thanks for that information, Penny," you say as you grapple with what to say next. "It's really odd that Debbie won't budge on this issue, because the board has already given her the go-ahead to change this part of the contract if need be. Let me talk with her and find out what's going on, and then I'll get back to you."

"Thanks, Richard. I'll talk to you soon."

As you hang up you, have the nagging feeling you may have just done something wrong during that seemingly innocent conversation, but you console yourself with the observation that you are just being loyal to your supporters. Besides, you say to yourself in your own defense, when the teachers are happy, that is good for everyone in the district. You are just trying to make sure they are happy.

Plan B

What's wrong with this episode? You have injected yourself into the process of labor negotiations without any authority to do so. You have disclosed the board's bargaining strategy to the union, and you have offered to do some backroom negotiating without board approval. In doing so, you have violated the confidence of your fellow board members, you have undercut the superintendent, and you probably have run afoul of the law. There are prescribed rules for how negotiations take place, including when, where, and with whom. The entire board does the negotiating, under the representation of a negotiating team—in your district's case, led by the superintendent. You have allowed yourself to become a back channel for the negotiations—or, in raunchier terms, you have become a "leak." You cannot and should not attempt to run the negotiations on your own but only as part of and in conjunction with the entire board.

What else could you have done when Penny called?

- Ignore the call. It's the weekend, and you're off duty.
- Thank Penny for the call but tell her there is really nothing you can do about it.
- Thank Penny for the call and let her know that the superintendent does indeed keep the board informed about the union's requests, the board fully considers all requests, and the bargaining team represents the board.

- ___ Ask if you can meet with Penny and her union's executive board to discuss all their concerns. After all, they got you elected, and you want to show your support of teachers.
- ___ Ask Penny to make her comments at the board meeting.

If you picked Option 3, you are thinking like an effective school board member. Option 1 may be satisfying in the short term, but it causes you to shirk your responsibilities as a board member. You have a responsibility to be available to listen in good faith to the concerns of your community. This does not mean you have to be on duty 24 hours a day or that you have to drop everything whenever the phone rings, but you should respond to all communications within a reasonable time.

Option 2 may be technically correct (in the sense that as a single board member you cannot engage in negotiations with the union), but it may leave Penny with the impression that you are not listening or don't care. It is best to assure her that you are committed to working through the established negotiation process to a successful resolution that serves everyone's interests—which is essentially what happens in Option 3.

Option 3 works because it keeps the lines of communication where they should be: within the negotiation structure that both sides have agreed to. You want to come to a successful resolution, but you have to follow the rules. You probably should let the superintendent and the board know about Penny's call and your response to it when you discuss negotiations in closed session.

Option 4 has some attractive features in that it is always a good idea to maintain open lines of communication with all the major players in your district. However, you cross a line when you solicit communication with the intention of setting up a back channel to the district through you rather than through the board. This option is also problematic in the sense that you should not be beholden to any group. You are not the teachers' school board member (no matter how much they helped you get elected); you must see yourself as representing everyone in the district. In short, you are the kids' school board member in that your decisions should always be based on what is best for the children in your district. Usually, that will coincide with what is good for teachers, but not always.

The final option also has some merit in that it is always appropriate to recommend that concerned people bring their concerns to the board, either by addressing the board at a meeting or by writing a letter. However, in this case, this suggestion might come off as

seeming disingenuous to Penny. She might think you are “blowing off” her appeal.

Lessons Learned: Don’t Negotiate for the District

Don’t negotiate for the district. When you agree to set up a back channel for labor negotiations, you put yourself in the position of single-handedly negotiating for the district. In doing so, you place yourself above your colleagues on the board, above the leader of your negotiating team, and, most likely, above the law. That is a place reserved for terrible school board members.

Superintendents’ Lessons Learned

The superintendent needs to make sure the board has discussed how it wants to carry out labor negotiations and that all board members have agreed to follow the process. By making sure that the board has received the inservice training it needs concerning labor negotiations, she can fulfill her job of preventing board members from looking bad. When a board member crosses the line by negotiating for the district, the superintendent must gently intervene, either by have a nonthreatening chat with the board member or by asking the board president to do so.