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# Terrible Habit #11

## Abstain on Tough Votes

### 10:30 p.m., Special Meeting

You are at a special meeting to consider whether or not to call a bond issue election. For the last 2 hours, you have been listening to speakers, both pro and con, concerning a proposed bond issue election that would raise property taxes for school construction. One side says there is still plenty of room to house all students if the district would just reopen a school they closed a few years ago. The other side says that now is a good time to ask the community to raise their taxes and that once new school buildings are constructed, they will be put to good use.

That's not all, either. The board has discussed this issue at regular meetings throughout the year and has listened to hours of input at previous meetings—especially from a citizen's committee that has been working on the bond issue plan all year. Your bookcase at home has a whole shelf devoted to information about this issue.

It has been a long night. You are tired and torn. You can see the merits of the arguments on both sides. Even your fellow board members seem evenly divided, with a couple in favor and a couple opposed. Everyone has run out of things to say. As the final vote approaches, you find that you simply cannot come to a decision. This one is too close to call.

The board president, Al Altman, looks around and asks, "Are we ready for the vote?" Seeing a few nods, he proceeds with "All those in favor, please raise your hand." Two hands go up. "All those opposed," says Al. Two hands go up. "Any abstentions?" You raise your weary hand. Al concludes, "The motion fails."

There are groans from the floor, and someone from the back of the room shouts, "Make up your mind!"

Moments later, the meeting is adjourned, and you must face a frustrated crowd as you make your way through the boardroom.

Did you do something wrong? How can it be wrong to follow your conscience? These are your thoughts as you drive home from what has turned out to be not your favorite meeting. In defense of your action—actually, your lack of action—you can say that you just did not know what to do, so you abstained. Besides, if there had been three votes for the motion, it would have passed anyway, even with your abstention.

## Plan B

Abstentions have a special role in board votes. When you feel you have a conflict of interest, it is appropriate for you to abstain; actually, abstaining is legally and ethically required of you if you have a conflict of interest. When you feel you do not have enough information to make an informed decision, it is appropriate to abstain. When you believe that the board should have more time to discuss the issue, it may be appropriate to abstain. In some cases, you might even want to ask the district office to consult with legal council to see if your abstention might be legally required.

However, the scenario described in this section does not involve any of those conditions, so abstaining is really not a legitimate move for you. You have been given plenty of information, heard from every voice on the issue, and had all your questions answered. You have had adequate time to educate yourself, to consult, and to consider the proposal. It is now your responsibility to make an informed decision that you believe is in the best interests of the children of the district.

Here are some of your options:

- \_\_\_ Ask to put the vote off until a later meeting.
- \_\_\_ Vote with the majority so your vote will not really decide the issue.
- \_\_\_ Make an informed decision that you believe is in the best interests of the children of the district.
- \_\_\_ Be absent on the day of the vote.
- \_\_\_ Tell your fellow board members that you did not know what to do, so you flipped a coin.

As you see, Option 3 corresponds to my recommended plan of action. Concerning the first option, asking to postpone a vote can be an appropriate move when you feel there is a need for more information, more public input, or more board discussion. Similarly, I generally feel uncomfortable voting on a major issue the first time it appears on the agenda because I like time to think about it. However, the issue in this scenario has been fully discussed, the public has had its say, and you have studied volumes of information. You really have no legitimate grounds for asking for a deferral.

Option 2 seems to satisfy everyone; you appear to be taking a stand but, really, to your way of thinking, your vote was not needed, so it is the same as abstaining. The problem with Option 2 is that it reflects an abrogation of your responsibility to come to an informed decision. You were elected by the voters to inform yourself on each issue that comes before the board, to ask any questions you need to make sure you fully understand the issue, to seek public input, to discuss the issue with your fellow board members, and ultimately to DECIDE. If you refuse to decide, you are letting the voters down. Still, I know that deciding sometimes can be a painful experience.

Option 4 is just another way of copping out, and Option 5 is obviously a silly answer that I put on the list just to round it out.

## **Lessons Learned: Be a Decider**

Be a decider. Study the issue at hand, ask all the questions you need to fully understand the issue, listen carefully to what everyone else has to say, express your thinking on the issue, think hard, and come to a decision. Opting out of the decision process because it is hard for you to decide puts you on the road to becoming a terrible school board member.

## **Superintendents' Lessons Learned**

Could Superintendent Debbie Dineson have prevented this episode of terrible boardsmanship? She could make sure that each board member has all the information he or she needs. She could make sure the board has training in the decision-making process, including when it is appropriate to abstain. She could make sure that the board has discussed how it wants to do business, perhaps at a retreat. If all else fails, at the meeting she could be ready to practice first aid by

gently commenting on the need for everyone to vote unless there is a conflict of interest. That is a tricky task that requires the utmost tact because it would be unwise and inappropriate to directly challenge a board member's decision to abstain. The proper way to make such a challenge would be to ask the board president to have a talk with the board member outside of a board meeting.

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# Terrible Habit #12

## Be Decisive; Don't Compromise

### Thursday, 7:44 p.m., Item 5G

Following a short break, you are back at your place, ready for the next agenda item: deciding how to run summer school this year. In the materials the administration has sent to you, four plans are described. Plan 1 is the least expensive, but it limits the program so severely that many deserving students will be closed out. Plan 2 is more expensive, but it serves all of the most deserving students and includes a second site that will make taking students to school more convenient for more parents. Plan 3 is very costly, exceeding the budgeted amount by \$40,000; and Plan 4 is also expensive and involves a very innovative but risky program that has never been tried before.

You feel you have done your homework on this item. You have read all the materials carefully, including summary reports from previous years (which used a model similar to Plan 2). You listened carefully and took notes at a previous meeting when the board discussed summer school and heard comments from a few parents. You have not received any e-mail or calls on this item, but you assume that simply means the community is expecting you to make a good decision for them. You even called the assistant superintendent for business services to make sure you understood the budget constraints of the board.

After studying the summer school plans from every angle, you are convinced that Plan 2 is clearly the best option. It keeps the

district on budget, it serves all the kids you wanted to serve, and it uses an approach that has worked well in the past. You have made your decision: Plan 2 has your vote.

After an overview of the four options from the superintendent, the board president suggests that each member briefly describe his or her thoughts on the matter. One board member has a lot of questions but does not really seem to have a preference for one of the plans. One board member favors Plan 2, like you and for essentially the same reasons you like it. To your surprise, however, two board members strongly favor Plan 4, or at least some of the innovative features of it. When it is your turn, you make your case for Plan 2 in clear and concise language.

It looks like this item could take a while, with two board members leaning toward one option, two leaning toward another, and one not leaning much at all. In spite of all the discussion back and forth, you stick to your guns. Plan 2 is clearly the best solution for the district, so you just keep pointing out its merits and the problems with the other plans. You've done your homework, and you have no intention of changing your mind on this one.

You see yourself as a decisive leader. You have no intention of compromising because that would only weaken the best plan. Besides, if you compromise, others would see you as weak—not as the decisive leader you strive to be.

## Plan B

What is wrong with the way you see this standoff? You see yourself as decisive, but others may see you as inflexible, even intransigent. You see compromising as a sign of weakness, whereas others may see it as sound leadership. Being a leader does not mean saying, "Do it my way." It means working out the best possible plan that is acceptable to a majority of the board (and hopefully, more). When decisiveness turns into intransigence, you have become a terrible school board member.

What could you have done? Check as many options as you need:

- \_\_\_ Explain all the reasons that Plan 4 is a bad idea.
- \_\_\_ Using a nearby dryboard, carefully explain the pros and cons of each plan so everyone can see why Plan 2 is best.
- \_\_\_ Ask board members what they need to see added to Plan 2 in order to vote for it.

- See if you could incorporate some of the most appealing aspects of Plan 4 into Plan 2 and thereby garner votes from the Plan 4 proponents.
- Suggest running a small pilot version of Plan 4 at one of the sites this summer and thereby garner votes from the Plan 4 proponents.

Option 1 is an extension of your inflexible approach to your fellow board members. You don't want to hear what they have to say. You just want them to listen to what you have to say.

Option 2 sounds reasonable, but you seem to be using it as a ploy to get your fellow board members to vote your way. Again, you do not want to compromise or even acknowledge that they may have some good points. You just want them to listen to you, the decisive leader.

Options 3, 4, and 5 each represent elements of a good Plan B. In Option 3, asking fellow board members what they would like to see in the final plan may be a good way to start to reach a compromise.

Option 4 is an excellent idea because it helps you see what your fellow board members like about Plan 4. It can help you see the goals they would like to accomplish so you can figure out a way to accomplish their goals and your goals at the same time.

Option 5 is an interesting compromise that would give you some information about the effectiveness of Plan 4 without having to make a major investment.

Overall, you need to craft a plan that a majority of the board will vote for, so your efforts should be directed toward reaching a mutually acceptable compromise—a plan that meets everyone's major goals for summer school.

## Lessons Learned: Compromise a Little

The lesson learned in this episode is that sometimes you need to compromise a little in order to avoid being a terrible school board member. By "a little," I mean that you may have to give up on one or two features that are not very important to you (but are important to a fellow board member) in order to retain the features of a plan that are important to you. Compromising does not mean giving up on your principles or giving up on your goals for the district. Compromising means giving in on some nonessential aspects of a plan in order to get

an agreement that satisfies your major goals and allows your fellow board members to do the same.

You are not being asked to forsake your principles for the sake of a vote, but you are being asked to think creatively about how you can accomplish most of your goals along with those of your colleagues. The bottom line is that the district's position on an issue is what a majority of the board wants, not what you as single person want.

A useful approach to compromise is interest-based negotiation, in which you ascertain the most important goals of each person and then craft a specific agreement that meets everyone's most important goals. You want a plan that is within budget, serves all the deserving students, and has been shown to be effective. Others may have different goals, such as ensuring that students can do some of their work online from home, or giving hiring priority to district teachers, or improving the evaluation program. If you can find a plan that meets everyone's (or almost everyone's) goals at least partially, then you are on your way to true leadership as a board member.

## **Superintendents' Lessons Learned**

Coming to agreement can be an inelegant process for a board, especially when it has to take place in front of an audience. The superintendent can do a lot to help this process by providing all relevant information, answering questions asked during board discussion, making recommendations when requested to do so, helping the board set a time line for its decision-making process, and, upon request, interjecting comments that keep the board discussion on track. When the board reaches a deadlock, the superintendent might suggest carrying over this item to the next meeting (when, hopefully, a more productive discussion can take place). Admittedly, there are times when the school administrators have to sit back and let the board struggle through a difficult issue, but that is really the essence of our mutual commitment to local control of public schools.