

Doing your best work is not a milestone; it is a *pattern* that must be repeated meeting after meeting.

A Season of Leadership: **STAYING STRONG**

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I grew up with the knowledge that our world is highly competitive. Many of us were taught as youngsters that getting ahead takes hard work; that you cannot get ahead without making sacrifices; or, you must earn your way, pay your dues, and so on. Those key-to-success life lessons largely proved to be true and anyone driven to reach personal and professional objectives can attest to the struggle and/or personal sacrifices necessary to reach those goals.

Likewise, for a school board to become an *effective* school board requires a well-defined process of governance combined with a legacy mind-set. It is obvious what we mean when we speak of well-defined processes. We understand that processes are much like assembly instructions. If you follow the instructions carefully, performing each step and not omitting any, the finished product will look and perform as you expect it to, or as it was advertised it would. But, what in the world is a *legacy* mindset?

I like to refer to a legacy mindset as *governing with the end in mind*. The *end* I refer to is not merely the conclusion of a process of decision making or the final step when working to meet a district goal, or the successful launch of a project. Governing with the end in mind speaks to the effect of decisions long after the decision is rendered, long after the initial impact of a decision is realized.

Governing with the end in mind helps ensure that both short and long-term consequences are considerations in every decision. Governing with one eye on the future is essential in public school oversight. Of course, learning and then applying these leadership and decision-making attributes as a school board member can be a trying experience and not every school board reaps the benefit of that collective effort.

Occasionally, a school board will rise like a phoenix from the ashes and shine brilliantly for a time, only to fall as quickly into old governance habits. But there are a few who will not allow the immediate success of good governance to deter its resolve to sustain those good habits, even when it is most difficult. It is those school boards we see climb to the pinnacle of the governance ladder and take up residence. Those are the boards to emulate; they represent a standard of governance that is appropriate for all boards, regardless of district size, socio-economic standing or academic ranking.

Climbing to the top of the mountain may require huge effort and determination, but the process of getting to the top and then staying on top, requires a different, strategy to be successful. The key is that both strategies are intentional. A school board does not accidentally do exceptional work, or accidentally sustain a high level of governance proficiency. No one denies that good fortune contributes to an atmosphere where schools can more easily prosper, but good fortune is never the reason for exceptional work and good governance, it is the benefit. There will always be peaks and valleys reflecting seasons of prosperity and times of trial. However, laying a foundation of good governance and then building upon that

foundation a framework of educational excellence and governance oversight is essential for creating an atmosphere that promotes student achievement and builds community confidence in district leadership.

But it is not easy. Just like there are certain diets and exercises for losing weight and for building muscle, there are other diets and exercises that are specifically designed to maintain a desired level of strength and weight. It takes a resolve to reach the goal, and as much resolve to maintain a particular level of proficiency.

One of the least advertised tenets of leadership is that it is essential . . . all the time. Consequently, when some school boards are really doing their best work, it is not altogether surprising that they do not sustain a high level of leadership long term. Attrition and its resulting loss of institutional knowledge, hot-button issues, significant emotional issues, and others are all contributors to a type of apathy that stifles board leadership. However, it is important to understand what board leadership is? What are we trying to convey to school boards when we challenge them to provide district leadership in educational governance oversight? Unless we have a common definition of leadership, it is pointless to go any farther.

One definition among many provides great insight to the issue of leadership at the board level. It goes like this: “Leadership is the art of mobilizing others to want to struggle for shared aspirations” (Kouzes & Posner, 1995, p.30). This is a great definition of leadership provided by school boards. Of course, how to mobilize others from a governance oversight position requires additional thought, but it is not a difficult question. While the school board establishes expectations, the superintendent of schools is the mobilizing agent of the board.

It is also important to understand that board leadership is singular. Every board member may have a leadership style peculiar to them; however, board leadership represents the collective leadership attributes of all board members. Being a strong, individual leader alone does not make the board strong. It may contribute to the leadership strength of the board, but alone it cannot carry the weight of leadership that a board should have. Board leadership is the melding of individual board member’s strengths to define the leadership characteristics of the board.

Consequently, board leadership is constantly evolving and reinventing itself as veteran members leave and new members assume their place.

This issue’s theme is about *staying strong*. The effort it takes to consistently do your best work can be taxing. But I sincerely doubt any of you would say, “I only want to do my best work for my district part of the time,” or “Doing my best work takes too much effort.” Better yet, I doubt anyone would openly state, “I don’t care about this issue, so I’ll just let the other board members decide this.” Staying strong means being informed and prepared,

but to do both requires discipline. It requires personal discipline in preparation and group discipline to effectively discuss and then vote objectively to render decisions that represent the best interest of public education on behalf of your district stakeholders. It means that personal preferences are never considered over the best interests of the district. Furthermore, it means when your preferences are not endorsed by your fellow board members, you need to respect their opinions as much as you want them to respect yours.

In today’s educational environment it is not enough to just occasionally do good work. It is not enough to rest on past laurels, depending on past success to carry you forward. No, today is a new day and it requires that requires that you do your best work . . . today! Tomorrow will require the same and the day after that and so on. Doing your best work is not a milestone; it is a pattern that must be repeated meeting after meeting.

The work is easier when you serve with like-minded board members, but if you do not, it is not an excuse to mar your legacy by complacency. You must do your best, regardless. But, when an entire board adopts a similar mind-set and establishes its governance practices on sound principles and data-driven decision-making habits, the legacy it builds helps ensure that those who follow will continue the pattern of excellence. 🍀

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REFERENCES

Kouzes, J.M. & Posner, B.Z. 1995. *The Leadership Challenge*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass