



The Value of **SERVICE**

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Expanding upon the theme of this issue, “The value of service”, it is important to identify the type of service under consideration before entertaining any discussion of its value. For the purposes of this narrative, and perhaps quite obviously, the service is school board service. However, apart from what might be considered the most apparent attributes of any value discussion are two perspectives from which the value of school board service might be observed. Those two viewpoints are intrinsic and extrinsic. But perhaps even more basic are the thoughts about service itself.

Years ago, gas stations used to be referred to as service stations. You would drive your vehicle alongside a fuel pump and an attendant would greet you and ask you how much gasoline you would like to have added to your fuel tank. While the gasoline was being pumped into your tank, the attendant would raise the hood and check the engine oil level, show you the dipstick reading and add more oil if necessary, and if you agreed. Then he would clean your windshield before capping off the tank and returning the nozzle to the pump. What you paid the attendant was the cost of the gasoline and any oil you may have needed. That cost included the services the attendant provided by pumping the gasoline, checking the oil level, and cleaning the windshield. Those service stations of yesterday existed to meet the basic, essential demands of motor vehicle operation; gas, oil and an occasional windshield wiper blade. Full-service stations provided a full-time mechanic to work on your car’s engine or to fix, rotate, change, balance, and align your vehicles tires. Often the patronage of one station over another depended on the type and quality of service employees provided when compared to their immediate competitors.

Service industries thrive by providing something that has real or perceived value. These providers may provide goods, but they are not involved in manufacturing. Examples of these services might mirror what we commonly regard as customer service (like the gas station attendant example above), or management providers, designers, etc. However, professional services, such as those provided by an attorney

or your tax preparer fall into this category as well as a long list of others. What may be surprising to you is that education institutions, like colleges and universities also fall into the service industry category and for the same reasons, public education does as well.

If we acknowledge the regard something has, its importance, worth, or usefulness, and then use that understanding to describe what we contribute or undertake (in some capacity), we then have the parameters for an added value discussion about service as it relates to that particular item. But asking a general question of board members regarding what they believe the value of school board service is to them, or the value it has for their

community, while an important question, is perhaps more difficult to articulate than anyone might imagine.

As stated in the beginning of this article, one perspective of the value of service is its intrinsic value, or what can be described as good by itself. Given that thought, we would naturally refer to the attributes representing the desired outcomes commonly expected or realized through board service. Consequently, using that description, we would say that the value of board service is nonderivatively good because it does not depend upon anything else (Zimmerman & Bradley, 2019).

But, not every person realizes the same intrinsic value merely by holding the office and, to be sure, any personal sense of value

is subject to change depending on the issues in the district, the dynamics within the board and between individual members, and other circumstances that either diminish or increase the perceived value a member receives from his/her participation. This makes it somewhat difficult to discern intrinsic value or to distinguish it from self-aggrandizing, especially when sharing the personal value someone receives and that is unfortunate. Being chosen, either by appointment or election, to an important position should be a source of pride, honor, and even humility, etc. These feelings are intrinsic inasmuch as they are particularly unique to each person and because the personal value in being selected and holding office is often a contributor to individual feelings of self-worth.

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Next is extrinsic value. Extrinsic value is most easily expressed as the things that are derivatively good, or in other words, things that have value “for the sake of something else to which they are related in their own way” (Zimmerman & Bradley, 2019, p. 3). It is not necessary or important to spend much time in an extrinsic value discussion and, quite honestly, after a while, it can get somewhat confusing. However, suffice it to say that extrinsic value, while often expressed as the impetus for board service, is dependent, to a great deal, upon the intrinsic value, importance or personal benefits, board members find because they choose and are chosen to align themselves in board service. The role boards play and the visible contributions they make on behalf of public education represents the extrinsic value of board service. This value can also be appreciated by district patrons, and others who are the observers, in addition to employees, students, and others as recipients of services rendered.

In a nutshell, intrinsic value is the importance felt by an individual because of the role, position, or contribution they make individually or as part of a group; it is a personal feeling. Extrinsic value is the consequential result of the intrinsic value of the position.

Inevitably, how a board member values his/her commitment of time and sacrifice as a member of a local school board is more about how personally rewarding the commitment proves to be. Consequently, if a board member finds personal satisfaction by doing good work because it is necessary, because it is the right thing to do, because it reflects the best interests of students, staff, community, or all three, then the intrinsic reward, or value of board service is realized because of their role in providing the service, while the extrinsic value is appreciated by both the board member from their role as the provider and others as beneficiaries or observers of the service being provided. Understanding this goes a long way towards the answer most conscientious board members give when asked why they became board members in the first place, and more so why they have sought repeated terms of service.

Much too often the reason someone runs for a school board position is one dimensional. Perhaps the community has been divided over some high profile matter, maybe it is an issue with athletics, or it might be that they have a problem with the

superintendent, a school administrator, or a teacher; perhaps it was a referendum that split the community. Unfortunately, those one-dimensional reasons are more than enough to cause board turnover but electing single-issue board members can be a larger problem for the entire district.

Being a responsible and effective school board member requires a much broader vision than any single issue or one-dimensional focus provides. Unfortunately, once the one-dimensional board member has addressed the reason s/he ran for office, any motivation to stay the course, do the greater work, or to work in concert with fellow board members to provide governance oversight

leadership rapidly fades. They may not physically leave the board, but they seldom seek a second term and they often become the ever present, but mentally absent member.

One often overlooked component in any discussion about the importance of sharing the value of service is how important it is to encourage others to seek the opportunity to serve. When you stop to think about it, every board member is a temporary servant. The 2019 ISBA School Board/Superintendent Profile survey showed that 46% of school board members are in their first term, 24% are in their second term, and 15% are in their third, and the remaining 15% are serving four or more terms (Indiana School Boards Association, 2019). These percentages have remained consistent over several years and, while they are slightly better than the national average, they do reflect a regular revolving door

that affects the overall governance oversight structure.

One reason for member turnover is that school board service is routinely described as a thankless job and perhaps that is the reason that just under half of all board members join the one (term) and done group. Regardless, every board member eventually retires, resigns or is unseated and someone else assumes their place at the board table. It may be that the thankless part of service is also what scares potential members away and makes current members less likely to seek additional terms. However, it is more likely that the message of intrinsic and extrinsic value realized by being a board member has not been effectively shared.

This fall, the biennial general election process will provide the framework where both incumbent and aspiring board members will again seek the privilege of serving their communities’

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best interests in public education. If percentages hold true, approximately 370 of the nearly 800 school board positions open in the next general election will likely be filled with brand new members. For board members today, the complexities of board governance require members who are unafraid to make hard decisions, but not foolhardy or irresponsible. In a public education environment that has become increasingly complex, more difficult to govern from an oversight perspective, and beset with increasing legislative hurdles, finding the right team member to help shoulder the responsibility has never been more important. It is not too early to begin identifying the individual(s) in your districts with the character and skill set for board service and to begin encouraging them to consider school board service. Leadership in the board room has never been more important.

Obviously, leadership requires leaders. I have shared this definition for a leader for many years, “A leader is a person you will follow to a place you will not ordinarily go alone” (Barker, 2019). In the construct of school board service, the entire board is the leader in every district and is responsible for guiding the school corporation into the future. Accomplishing that task is not accidental and it requires more than individuals who, in their own right, are great leaders, accomplished businessmen and women, successful entrepreneurs, dedicated family people, educated patrons, or community-minded citizens with a commitment to public education and a desire to serve their communities. It takes people with all those great qualities, plus one more attribute; they must have the ability and be willing to work together to speak with a single leadership voice from the boardroom. Every school district has those people, but the question is, how many are actively encouraged to seek the opportunity to serve their districts as school board members?

It is healthy for board members to intentionally revisit the value attributes that school board service has for them personally, as well as the value it has for their district and public education in general. But it is increasingly more important that they share that information with individuals who can

potentially shoulder the governance responsibility of your school district when they are finished. Succession planning in that sense is a responsible governance practice that does not minimize opportunities for change or one that squelches progress; rather, it is a conscientious action to ensure that what is valued most does not disappear from the local governance landscape. 🌟

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