



SO NOW YOU'RE A BOARD MEMBER:

HOW DO YOU AVOID SOME COMMON PITFALLS?



By Steve Horton, Director of Board Services

A universal truth about school board service is that it is not easy, and it is often unpredictable. In the absence of a magic crystal ball, it is rather difficult to know what lies ahead and what challenges our school boards will be asked to manage. There is no set playbook, nor step by step instructions.

There are, however, clear principles of boardmanship that do provide important guidance for avoiding some words and phrases often associated with poor board member performance that are never viewed in a positive way.

MICROMANAGEMENT

Perhaps this is the term used most often to describe problematic boards and individual board members. It refers to those who do not do a good job of staying out of the daily operations and administration work of the corporation. For some board members, the ability to let the administration do their jobs is difficult if not seemingly impossible. It is not unusual to hear superintendents say that often the most difficult part of their jobs is managing board members who overstep the boundaries of good governance.

Micromanagement takes on many forms. Often it manifests itself in board decisions that override or replace decisions that should be made by the superintendent. There is nothing to stop a board from passing a resolution that should have been an action resulting from a superintendent recommendation. While the hope is that boards and their superintendents will spend quality time together establishing clear goals and objectives for the school year and evaluating progress through the year, there is a fine line between setting a goal and expectations versus simply telling a superintendent what to do.

Many times micromanagement is a result of ineffective communication. The best of board members' intentions can result in overreach when there is a sense that critical decisions or needs are being left unattended. Trust also plays a great role in this discussion. A high level of trust is crucial

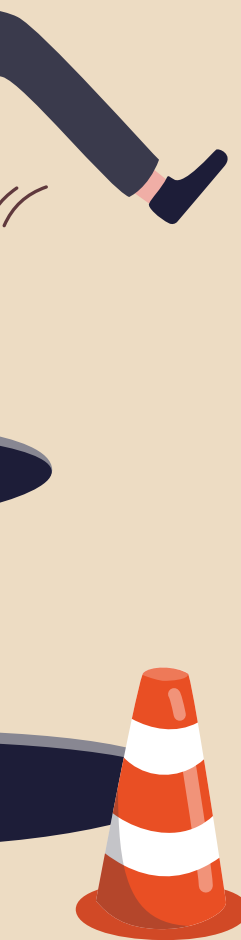
to maintaining the proper roles of governance and administration necessary to ensure the best possible operation of the corporation. This brings me to the second term of great consternation.

ROGUE BOARD MEMBERS

For all the conversations I have had with board members and superintendents, I have yet to hear one person refer to "rogue" in a good way. It is referring to the board member that refuses to play by the same norms as his or her fellow members. Policy and protocol are merely suggestions that can be ignored when it is not convenient or useful to one's end game. The true rogue member can do significant damage to trust, communication, morale, and overall perception of the board and school corporation.

It is extremely difficult to deal with this person. It is very important to clearly establish guidelines and working norms for the board's professional and personal conduct. Beyond that, if you are truly dealing with a bully, one piece of advice I find helpful is to take inventory of the ways in which you are enabling the bully. Do not let a member prevent you from doing your work together and seeking consensus. It is also important to continue to listen. Not to let one person rule, but to consider that everyone's input may be important to the final outcome regardless of your feelings about the person.

One point I hope all our newly elected members take to heart is how they come into their new position. I will always advocate for bringing your passion and commitment to the job but realize that you are the new member. Enter the new position with questions and a willingness to listen and learn. Do not allow yourself to be labeled as a rogue before you have had the opportunity to prove yourself as a valuable contributing member of the leadership team. Hopefully you will be able to help the board avoid another unfortunate label.



DYSFUNCTIONAL

This is the term used to describe boards that struggle to communicate, present themselves poorly to the public, and too often undermine the positive work being done in the corporation. This is not an individual issue; it is a leadership team issue. I have worked with boards that seemingly wear the dysfunctional label like a badge of honor. It is never a good situation and one only the board can resolve for themselves.

Where does dysfunction come from? Ultimately, there is no issue that cannot be resolved or worked through by a leadership team who realizes the work is “you and me vs. the issue” and not “you vs. me.” Typically, the members of the board cease to work together in a productive way when disagreements are allowed to become personal. When that happens, differences are not seen or accepted as merely a different viewpoint or perspective. They are allowed to be a statement about one’s credibility or character. In today’s culture that is exacerbated by social media. Digital social outlets are an embedded part of our society, and unfortunately, board members have used them in a destructive way toward one another. If there is one thing all board members should avoid, it is taking board business and personal grievances to the public through their personal social media. Resolution of differences should happen between board members, not in the court of public opinion.

Conflict is actually a productive and necessary ingredient for innovation and growth. Without healthy conflict, status quo becomes the norm, and “we’ve always done it this way” becomes the mode of

operation. In a proper speak up culture, members are allowed to voice opinions and share viewpoints of different perspectives without questioning another member’s integrity. Another aspect of a functioning speak up culture is that if a statement or action feels hurtful or intentional toward another member, it is not ignored or simply swept under the carpet. Members should be allowed to express their feelings and that should be taken as an opportunity to understand each other better as opposed to a returned personal attack. If I know that something I did hurt you, I should acknowledge that and endeavor not to do it again. It is a mutual respect shared by the entire board.

The only road out of a dysfunctional relationship is open communication, the ability to have the necessary conversation with the right person, and to focus on the issue at hand, not our differences.

Nobody said school governance was easy. Sometimes, despite our best work boards receive unwanted labels.

RUBBER STAMP

A fairly regular criticism of school boards across the country is that they are nothing more than a rubber stamp for the superintendent. Years ago, I sat in a board candidate workshop next to a gentleman who insisted that his board did nothing but vote yes, and someone had to do something about that. There was no clear understanding about what “that” was, but someone needed to do “something.”

The rubber stamp label often assumes that yes votes are inherently bad while overlooking the fact that truly good consensus work should result in a vote in the affirmative. The issue is that often the data study, discussion, and

brainstorming that leads to a decision acceptable for all members of the board is not seen by the community. When Gary Brochu, former board chair for the Berlin Connecticut Public Schools Board of Trustees was asked about why their board had so many yes votes, his answer was, “we practice boring professionalism.” That is not a bad thing for all boards to pursue, but what is the public perception?

In the midst of the work that is being done, it is easy to overlook the need to communicate well with the community. Public meetings are a time to share important details about the work people don’t necessarily see. Unfortunately, when money needs to be cut from the budget one of the first positions to get the axe is communications. I contend that every corporation regardless of size needs someone to oversee communications. You will never satisfy all the naysayers, but ultimately your goal should be to write your narrative and not let others write it for you. It is a full-time job and not one that should be handed to others who already have full plates.

IN THE END

The reality is that all of these labels and problematic situations require one thing: good boardmanship. There are plenty of manuals to refer to, but in the end, it all comes down to a very straightforward reality. We need to allow for differences, and diversity of thought. All of the resources devoted to helping school boards do their work effectively point out that good school governance is establishing a strong vision and focusing on the results. Ultimately that focus leads to our children. The beauty of public education is that it exists for all children. Perhaps that is a good place to start. 🎓

