



Starting With **PURPOSE**

By Dr. Michael T. Adamson, Director of Board Services



For many of you, this year marks the beginning of a journey. Assuming a leadership role during a devastating pandemic is a unique experience in public education. Yet, this challenge did not deter those of you who sought and have been elected to serve on your local school board. You will soon find that some people will think you crazy to have willingly placed yourself in the middle of public scrutiny for what has long been characterized as a thankless job. In fact, you too may soon wonder what you were thinking when you filed your petition to be placed on the ballot this past November.

Of course, you will quickly discover that the job is not “thankless”; although, admittedly, the public and/or private thank-yous are likely to be few and far between. Still, they do come from time-to-time and you should not be hesitant to enjoy the feelings a heartfelt acknowledgement brings. However, keep in mind that you did not (or should not have) sought a board seat for the public accolades

that accompany the office. If you did, you are sure to be sorely disappointed.

The theme of this issue has fittingly been titled “Starting with Purpose”. We are at the beginning of a new year and 2021, not unlike the years that have preceded it, is sure to be replete with challenges. It also is sure to bring rewards, both intentionally and accidentally. What many have learned over the years is that the magnitude of success or rewards as a result of forging great inroads, realizing huge accomplishments, achieving small victories, or when realizing catastrophic failure is part and partial to how well the year starts. How well you start always affects how you finish... always.

While many of you are just beginning, you are joining other members who, for the most part, have been in the fray for 2, 4, 6, 8 or more years. Just last issue we celebrated a retiring board member who served 52½ consecutive years and while very few, if any, will mirror that milestone, the point is that new board members will be joining others that have already served their apprenticeship at the board table. But starting well is not about seniority, collective wisdom, or institutional knowledge. Those can and often do play a role, but none of them are representative of the essential ingredient for starting well. The essential ingredient for starting well and ultimately finishing your course without regret is intent. What is your intent behind becoming a board member? And, if you are a veteran board member, what is your intent for remaining a board member?

Undoubtedly, the pandemic, or rather the continuing confusion and chaos as a result of the pandemic, was the impetus for some of you. Others may have just been looking for a way to give back to their community and show civic responsibility. A few may have run because they were dissatisfied with the current leadership within the school, or on the board. Others may have been prompted to run because the athletic programs in their school have been less than successful. Still others undoubtedly sought election because of recent referendum activity in their district, one that was either successful or unsuccessful (usually the former). People run for about as many reasons as you can imagine, some with thoughtful intent and purpose and others... not so much.

Regardless, here you are. Your bid was successful, the election or appointment is history, and the importance of that event will soon fade away, being overshadowed by the governance responsibility that lies before you and your fellow board members. As you participated in the organization of the board, election of officers, determination of regular meeting days and times for the year and other business associated with reorganization, one thing probably never crossed your mind; this board is brand new. Even the introduction of one new personality changes the dynamic in the board room and the changes associated when seating a new board member alters the board's collective character. It is never the same as it was before the new member was seated. To be sure, some boards do not appear to change significantly with the introduction of a new member, but that is the exception, not the rule.

So, how do you ensure that you start well? The first thing

that comes to mind is... training. Of course, this is predominantly my area of responsibility at ISBA and research shows that training does affect board members' perceptions of their overall competency in leadership and governance (Adamson, 2011). So, training is important, but the mistake that is often made is believing that training is just for the new person, when it is just as important to provide ongoing and remedial training for the veteran member and overall training for the entire board. Remember, this is a new board. The

majority may still be veteran board members, or there may be a majority of new members, but it is not the same board it was on December 31st. Plus, depending on the climate of the district and whether the election was friendly or contentious will directly affect whether things start well, or badly. Although whole board training does not guarantee things will start well (nothing does), it does give the board/superintendent team its best opportunity to realize a seamless transition from the old team to the new one.

If the election was a contentious one, the issues driving a change in the leadership need to be addressed up front. Pretending the elephant is not in the room is a mistake and the sooner you acknowledge the space that the elephant displaces, the better. Difficult or uncomfortable conversations only get more so the longer they are avoided. If the issues are past decisions, a new member is not going to immediately change his

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or her opinion regarding those decisions simply by taking an oath of office.

New members often arrive with opinions of past board actions that are based upon information gathered from a different data pool, one that not uncommonly propagates misinformation or exaggerated accounts of purpose and effect. Veteran board members' opinions are formed using what they have come to appreciate as valid sources of information and advice. New board members have not been operating from the same decision-making base, so how can they be expected to blindly change an opinion, when they have yet to form an appreciation for the information sources that school board members rely upon or for those mitigating factors that delay or change decisions that would otherwise be determined? Common sense says they cannot, and it is unrealistic to expect them to do so until they have?

Allow new members to ask questions regarding past decisions without getting defensive. Of course, that is more difficult when you are embroiled in controversy, but it is not impossible. Providing background is essential for new board members to understand what is driving the board's current position or the current climate within the district; however, reaching an agreement or an appreciation for past decisions without the benefit of the same experiential timeline may be difficult to attain immediately after a new member is seated. In these cases, allow the new board member to arrive at their own speed. It may seem like the board is fragmented for a period of time, but that is the reality of a system that allows for substantial changes every two years. That same biennial election system validates the statement that says, every board is always within two years of dysfunction. However, the dysfunction level realized by election turnover is heavily impacted by the commitment to do everything possible to ensure the new team starts well.

My comments have been directed to boards that have welcomed new members which is what everyone considers following an election. But, what about the boards that experience no turnover, where the incumbents are all elected for another term? Some boards will not change because incumbents mount a successful campaign over other candidates or they are reelected

without opposition. Either way, the board that continues as it was and is perhaps faced with another malady, the problem of inertia.

It is easy to become comfortable with a level of governance when we are not challenged or when we transfer our responsibilities to others to execute. This is less likely when a board is faced with the challenges that naturally come when new board members assume office. Acquainting new members with operating rules, revisiting foundational statements, sharing the reasoning behind past decisions and providing other information that is helpful to new board members as they begin helps to energize the entire board-superintendent team. Of course, I am not suggesting that the board that does not realize member turnover following an election will become lazy or disinterested, but it is normal to fall into a false sense of governance leadership

when not challenged by growing expectations. The boards that merely "kick the can down the road" or avoid participating in decisions that establish strategic direction in their districts have succumbed to inertia. Fortunately, it need not be fatal, but it can only be corrected if boards recognize it and take action to revitalize their leadership and governance contributions to their districts.

We have started a new year, but we brought some 2020 baggage along with us. We still have the pandemic to contend with; there are increasing concerns about the impact to student achievement because of the varying effectiveness of virtual learning; worries about sustained funding for public education in the wake of the adverse

economic impact resulting from COVID-19; and, we have brought forward an obligation and, hopefully, a commitment to begin to resolve the inequities to allow school board members to confidently represent the best interests of all children.

Those carryovers are a plateful without adding anything else. However, there will be unknown 2021 issues that will test your resolve and there are sure to be celebrations and heartache along the way. For many of you, remember, the race has just started and there will be times when you will need to sprint and other times when you will need to pace yourselves. Be thoughtful, be patient, learn much, and... be determined to run well. 🏆

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