



The power of school board protocol

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It is difficult to meet expectations if they are not clearly stated. Often there is frustration around working with great responsibility—feeling the weight of the position you hold, but not fully understanding what the expectations are for how you do your work and make the decisions for which you are held accountable.

That is the situation for many new board members, and an ongoing struggle for many veteran board members, too. The lack of “rules of engagement” as it were, can make board interaction seem like a moving target. A wise board member once said to me years ago when I was new to the work that those things that are not written down are left to personal interpretation. Among a group as diverse in thought and ideologies as a typical school board, the absence of clarity can prove discouraging.

All of this is to say that there is great value in creating a board protocol document. That is a set of mutually accepted rules for how you do your work together. This should not be something that one person writes and hands to the rest of the team—although that is not a bad starting point. Ideally, this should be co-created with the input of the entire team. The process is an exercise in good consensus building. Start with a task, receive input from all members of the team, use that input to inform a final solution, and work with the necessary give-and-take to arrive at a final solution that all the members can live with.

As you are doing your work, consider the definition of boardmanship: the attributes of service exhibited by an individual who serves on a board, including ethical principles, concepts, and ideas. Boardmanship also includes the collective traits that emerge through the board’s interpersonal interactions.

The protocol document should reflect the point where ethics and interpersonal interactions intersect. It is a declaration of the way you agree to work together. Bringing your board together, having a conversation, and developing a shared understanding of your work and individual relationships is a useful activity for every school board.

For inspiration, consider taking the time to review ISBA’s [Code of Ethics](#), which many school boards post on their websites and other places. Starting with the tenants of effective boardmanship and honing that to reflect the work of your board should be the desired outcome.

In the end, be prepared to stand by your document. It is meaningful when all members sign it and take official action in a public meeting to adopt the final version. Publicly post it on your website and in your board room. It is a clear statement to your school corporation and community that you take your work together seriously and are willing to commit to your stated operating protocol. As one of the required elements for obtaining ISBA’s highest board honor, [The Exemplary Governance Award](#), you will be one step closer as a result of your work.