



STAYING IN YOUR LANE

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When we work professionally, just like when we drive on the highways, it's important that we understand the rules of the road. Overall, most people seem to grasp the wisdom of proper driving etiquette. Fewer individuals understand the need for civilized board room behavior, even if they recognize the damage

done to institutions and organizations that have been afflicted with 'outsiders who want to shake things up.'

In many cases, the disruptions created by people who are going to straighten things out quickly, last far longer than their employment or term of office. They don't have the patience or persistence to learn the job, pay the dues, and become effective in their roles. The steady, organization-minded, responsible ones who remain behind after these objectionable individuals have left, typically have to clean-up their messes.

While I have never been on a board made dysfunctional by either a wild-eyed radical or a single-issue board member, I have certainly seen the results elsewhere. These disruptive individuals impede the smooth flow of civilized conversation on policy matters with obnoxious demands that their issue or cause be handled first. They try to monopolize conversations because they don't believe



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that anyone else has the sense or drive to deal with their perceived problems, and they think that by virtue of volume and sheer repetition, they will eventually get what they want. These detestable folks can suck the air from a board room discussion, will attempt to bully anyone who disagrees with them, and make the entire organization look foolish in the media.

Board members who come-in wanting to fire a coach, teacher, or superintendent always have a difficult time understanding that the job is bigger than that. People who get excited about the number of weight machines in the gym, the paint scheme in an elementary school hallway, or the timing of a specific school bus route will likely never be able to step-back and understand the value of policy review and oversight. If your intention upon joining a school board is to micromanage your

corporation's daily operations, you've picked the wrong way to spend your evenings.

Those decisions are tactical and aren't the kinds of things that we do as public school board members. We hire a superintendent to handle those things, and that professional hires other highly qualified people to delegate specific tasks to. If we try to tell those folks what to do, it's demoralizing and detrimental to the overall mission of the school system: educating children. Our job is strategic. We look at policy and plan for the future. We review the performance of the school system as representatives of the public. If we don't like what we see, then we hire someone else to do a better job as the chief operational officer.

It is particularly incumbent upon new board members to understand this differentiation of responsibility. You were elected or appointed to perform oversight, not to be the athletic director or

the middle school principal. Newer board members need to listen to the longer-serving board members and the administrators of their school system about the problems that they are facing. Your role is to act as a sounding board and to offer fresh ideas about solving problems. You don't want to swerve out of your lane and become a problem yourself.

Now some people might fairly say, 'But I was elected to get more money for the musical organizations,' or 'I was told by the Mayor when she appointed me to deal with traffic at dismissal.' To which the wise old board member responds, 'So you were, but you get elected (or appointed) with poetry. You must govern with prose and practicality.' Slow down and learn your job. Public school corporations are an element of our republican form of government.

If there are still cries for more band money from your constituents in a year, bring it up in a board discussion with the superintendent. That is an element of your job. Once you understand the rationale and procedures for how school is let-out in the afternoons, you can ask for data about traffic at dismissal. That will get an internal study started. That is well within your wheelhouse. Listen. Learn your job and understand the rules of the road. You'll be vastly more effective at improving your community's school system than the flash in the pan who was mad that their daughter didn't start on the varsity volleyball team and spent twenty minutes haranguing the superintendent and board during their first organizational meeting.

No one who looks deeply and examines modern public school corporations would deny that they are cautious to change or take action on specific items. That's by design. Things generally work acceptably in the present, and we can't risk the damage to our children that could be done by rapidly adopting some crackpot scheme that sounds good initially but ultimately isn't. There are plenty of those out there, and it would be unacceptable to our patrons and to our community if we signed-on to one of them. Our mission of educating tomorrow's citizens is too critical to make decisions in haste. No matter how you got the position, you should patiently and attentively learn the job first. The road we travel is icy, dangerous, and fraught with potential missteps and peril. The irresponsible rascal that passed you in a sports car going 30 miles an hour faster than you will be in the ditch somewhere down the road. Keep calm and stay sanely in your lane. 🚗