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PEAK PERFORMANCE

**Practical Strategies, Resources,
Processes, and Wisdom for Trustees
and their CEOs**

January, 2007

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Monitoring Operational Expectations/Limitations

In your policies, you have committed to spend most of your time and attention on whether the organization is producing the results your owners expect and your Ends policies demand. That is the right priority, one that positions the board to make the important difference it alone can make in the life of the district.

But your policies also delegate considerable authority to your CEO to operate the organization and its programs, without day-to-day involvement by the board. The only caveat: the CEO is obligated to interpret your OE/EL policies reasonably, and assure organizational compliance with them. In order for the board to safely get out of its old preoccupation with operational issues and approving operational decisions, it must be assured that its policy values are being complied with. That means effective OE/EL monitoring.

OE/EL monitoring is important. It is the vehicle by which the board exercises its responsibility to assure that the organization is performing within the board's stated policy values. For the board to delegate operational authority to any CEO without demanding assurance of compliance is to abdicate the board's responsibility to its owners. This is the tradeoff: the CEO has extraordinary authority to do the job—without board interference—but the CEO has high accountability for organizational performance within the board's stated values.

But although OE/EL monitoring is important, it is not intended to be an opportunity to "legally micromanage" the organization. As monitoring reports show up on board agendas, it is incumbent on the board to be assured that the organization is performing as expected. But the board somehow must avoid the temptation to use the reports and the ensuing conversation about the specific operational areas as a vehicle to get back into the "weeds" of operational decision-making. There is a reasonable balance between effectively monitoring organizational performance and micromanaging it.

What the Board Looks For

In monitoring the Ends Results policies, the board looks for reasonable interpretation and *reasonable progress* when it receives and acts on monitoring reports. In the case of OE/EL reports, the board is looking for reasonable interpretation and *compliance*. The board is not reviewing OE/EL reports as a means to judge whether the CEO has made the "right" choices. For five or seven or nine individuals to attempt to reach some definition of the "right" decision places the board back where it said it wanted to leave: second-guessing the CEO at every turn, and in many instances either making decisions for the CEO, or "helping" the CEO make them through approvals. (cont'd on page 5)

**OE and EL
monitoring
"The board is
looking for
reasonable
interpretation
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A Blazing Question: in the Real World

“ Avoid public discredit? What is the result of not confronting the lack of ethics and integrity on the part of the chair? ... Confront the situation.”

“Our board chair continues to assume authority not given to him in policy. He meets with community groups and makes promises. He gives direction to our superintendent contrary to what the board has said in policy or in meetings. He blocks our consensus to conduct a retreat and even contracted with a firm other than our chosen facilitators. How do we handle this without ugliness or diminishing our public image?”

You have a policy on chair authority and a policy on dealing with violations. Does the board choose to adhere to its own policies and commitment to governing with excellence?” Choices: 1. Ignore him and hope others don’t recognize the inconsistencies? **Wrong—everybody sees it and they are waiting for the board to take action. Inaction says you don’t care.** 2. Talk in private setting about the abuses with the full board. **Outline steps in corrections.** 3. Removal from office, if you can.

Can you avoid public discredit? Yes if you are seen as straight-up. Consider: What is the long-term result of not confronting the chair’s lack of ethics and integrity vs united efforts of a strong and unified board? Confront the situation. ■

Achieving Excellence: Barriers to Change

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Your board made the decision to improve the way it does business. Traditional board work wasn’t working well. Staff-driven agendas, useless policy, individual or even party politics, endless and mind-numbing debate about minutiae, and perhaps, less than excellent student results permeated your former board life. You concluded that your board must learn to govern – doing *its* job and no one else’s - *with excellence* in order to achieve organizational purpose: educating children.

Your board consciously committed to good governance through a customized design for change based on written governing values that would effectively meet your needs – through either Policy Governance®, Coherent Governance or Strategic Governance.

As a board, you have:

- Identified, delegated for implementation, and committed to monitor rigorous operational values in order to get out of day-to-day micromanagement;
- Committed in clear language to function as a unit, exercising your board role, discipline and responsibility to each other and the district – even when it could curb your First Amendment rights – to improve the health and functioning of the board;
- Delegated authority to your CEO to lead an organizational response to your stated expectations for student achievement. He or she, in turn, now is free to delegate and hold accountable each department, each school, each administrator and each teacher to ensure that children are taught and learn according to your specifications;

Established results for student achievement – truly audacious statements of expectation for *all* students. The expectations are demanding, representing what you as community trustees believe are crucial standards if students are to thrive in their world.

In creating high performance standards for the board, staff and students, you have established expectations that, when viewed in total, can result in your becoming a “world-class” district— like a brilliant diamond , a shining example of what a public education system can achieve while working within the diverse, complex, rapidly changing world we live in.

Your leadership has created the potential for a transformation from a traditional board and district to one that meets the expectations our critics have for lay governing boards.

This is intended to be an organization characterized by role clarity for board and employees, challenging expectations for everyone, new and different measures of success, freedom to innovate within identified boundaries – but all unerringly focused on accountability for student results.

Yours is a pioneering board that saw the need for change and purposefully designed a system of governance to meet those needs. *How has it worked? Has your board, your district, become the world-class provider of education that you anticipated and hoped for? Have you achieved the new levels of board, member, and district performance you anticipated? Do you have the people and structure to elevate and sustain quality performance and excellence?*

Have you achieved the edge that will set your district on course for excellence ... apart from the norm... in front of the pack????

Or is your board, and its members, playing pretend?

Is this change effort too hard, too long, too disciplined, too different from the way it's always been? Is your board, your district, on the pathway to mediocrity or even eventual extinction?

Change. It's a leadership conundrum.

The purpose of this article is to help you identify some barriers to sustainable change and improvement. A choice: 1. either to stay the course and purposely go forward to achieve the vision you had for change or, 2. allow the barriers to thwart your efforts. There is no status quo in change.

Barrier One: Lack of Self-Discipline

Admirably, boards want to honor differences of perspective and opinion among their members. But many successful change efforts are minimalized by members “playing nice” and not confronting misdirected or errant behaviors.

Lack of discipline manifests itself in many ways: The errant chairman who chooses to exercise individual power; the board that refuses to monitor its policy on chair authority and do the “wink-nod” to avoid confronting its leader; the board that finds debriefing untimely and dispenses with this quality improvement necessity; the board that passively self-monitors board behavior policies because it might stir confrontation.

The board articulated values governing member and board behavior, and committed to monitoring its own performance. Failure to hold itself and each other accountable tells the CEO, staff and public that you didn't really mean it. Allowing yourselves or each other to misstep or to intentionally and willfully violate your commitments means the whole system is up for grabs. Why should any constituent group take the board seriously if it doesn't faithfully monitor and adhere to its own governing commitments?

Failure of the board, CEO or staff to behave in ways that are consistent with the vision of student expectations and values for relationships and behavior serves to increase cynicism and resistance to any transformation to excellence.

You made these commitments. You thought they were important. It is essential that the board and CEO “walk the talk” if this transformation is to be effective and powerful.

Barrier Two: Not Investing in Board Development

Change for a board and organization takes time. Some change experts say sustainable change requires a minimum of five years and that we should plan out for ten!

Yet our nano-second patience seduces boards into moving off course, seeking the next program of the month that it can claim credit for and use to personal advantage.

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Even more frequently, we witness boards that tire of the structure and drift off to the more comfortable role of making operational decisions, “managing the manager”, fixing problems and doing “stuff” that seems to be important to “the community.”

Harsh? No – all too often our real experience.

Transformation of board work and district focus begins when a board has the sincere commitment to diagnose, address and continuously critique and improve its own governing style and processes – in order to focus on student achievement. This requires a calendar of continuous debriefing, time spent in conversation with one another, and retreats to reflect, assess, prioritize and give clear direction.

Board development includes inside training. In Aspen, CO veterans provide orientation for candidates to the board so they know what they are signing up for. Additionally, they provide thorough training to new board members by going through each policy, incorporating relevant changes, and renewing their mission and results. The training is conducted by the board and not delegated to the administration or school boards association. Members learn together, and come to understand as colleagues, how the board operates as a unified body in this unique environment.

Other professional development areas for boards become apparent as members work closely together focused on student achievement. Fairfax Count, VA brought in Ken Kaye to help them with 21st Century Skills; Issaquah, WA brought in data experts; Columbus, WI engaged an expert in conducting focus groups; Palm Springs, CA used the Meyers Briggs Type Indicator in a retreat to help members better understand each other and work together with mutual appreciation.

“Reality? Achievement of audacious goals by any organization cannot be achieved when pockets of resistance work against organizational purpose and are permitted to fester.”

Barrier Three: Not Creating an Internal Urgency for Transformation

The world of public education is changing: charters, private vouchers, home schooling, NCLB, state departments, mayors, demanding publics all are forcing boards and districts to examine old ideas about how youngsters should be educated. The marketplace has new competitive realities that include a pass/fail judgment.

Some wise person has said that change occurs only when “the pain of change is less than the pain of remaining the same.” The successful change-demanding board recognizes the growing public dissent and dissatisfaction with what it considers to be the high expenditure of tax dollars for mediocre results. It also understands the growing competition from other providers; uncompetitive student performance compared to other districts, other states and other countries; the loss of staff due to discouragement with the status quo or to opportunities for higher-paying jobs.

Education is rife with people who assume the position, “We’ve always done it this way – who are you to tell me what to do differently?” Why would an entrenched, yet talented, staff want to change the way it does business? After all, they are the professionals – you are the “lay” people. Wounded pride, bruised egos, professional indignation can result when the board demands change.

And boards run scared.

Reality? Achievement of audacious goals by any organization cannot be achieved when pockets of resistance work against organizational purpose and are permitted to fester. Real board leadership must be exercised by encouraging and supporting CEO efforts to “take staff where they’ve never gone before.” CEO leadership will require professional assessment of barriers to good teaching, good learning, good environments and the courage and support to do things differently. And when some employees cannot buy into the vision for change, sometimes tough decisions must be made by the CEO—and supported by the board.

It is the battle to capture hearts and minds. And it’s an important battle. (cont’d on page 6)

OE/EL Monitoring (cont'd from Page 1)

What the Board Should Expect?

When the board receives an internal report on an OE/EL policy, it is entitled to see certain things. It should expect to see, at a minimum, the following:

- A restatement of its policy language; followed by
- The CEO's literal interpretation of the provision (each part of the policy needs its own separate interpretation); followed by
- A certification of compliance—either in or out (again, separate certification for each part of the policy); followed by
- Evidence of compliance.

An OE/EL monitoring report that says, in essence, “trust me,” is not acceptable. The board has delegated significant authority to the CEO to make decisions, and the report is the basis for the board's assurance that things are going as expected.

The expectation of honest reporting by the CEO is a given; if the organization is not in compliance, that *must be the certified statement of condition, along with information about why it is non-compliant, what is being done to gain compliance, and when compliance might be expected.*

Evidence of compliance is not always easy to generate. But on the other hand, there must be *some* basis for the CEO's conclusion that the organization is compliant; what is it? The board should know what that basis is.

What to Do With The Reports

When the board receives an OE/EL monitoring report, it is obligated to provide a response to the CEO signifying its disposition of it. Remember, as the board disposes of the reports, it is building a portfolio record of CEO performance. If the board is satisfied that the report constitutes evidence of reasonable interpretation and compliance, it should give appropriate feedback. If not, it is obligated to say why.

This is our best advice to a board about how to dispose of OE/EL monitoring reports: begin with a motion and second to accept the report as evidence of compliance. As the discussion evolves, if there are specific issues that a board member believes are not reasonably interpreted or that are not compliant, those exceptions are dealt with by amendments to the main motion. After all such “exceptions” are discussed and voted on individually.

A vote on the main motion as amended results in clear feedback from the board to the CEO about its action on the report and any matters that may be considered non-compliant.

If certain parts of a policy are considered to be out of compliance, they go on the CEO's “to do” list. Some non-compliant policies may not be considered significant enough to warrant revisiting before the next scheduled monitoring event for that policy. If so, no special treatment is necessary, other than the CEO's effort to remedy the condition as quickly as possible.

But other non-compliant matters may be more critical. If the board wants to re-monitor any such policy provisions sooner, the motion should specify the date for re-monitoring, and that action should be noted on the board's annual calendar or work plan. That way, nothing gets lost.

“There must be *some* basis for the CEO's conclusion that the organization is compliant; what is it?”

Conclusion

If done right, OE/EL monitoring can be one of the most beneficial parts of effective governance. Effective OE/EL monitoring can assure that literally every part of the operational organization is “opened up” and critically examined at least annually. It can be a significant management tool for a CEO and senior staff, as well as a means to assure both the board and the public that the organization is performing at the standard set by the board in policy. ■

Monitoring Process for OE/EL Policies

Step 1: CEO Reasonable Interpretation

Literal interpretation of Board's statement

Choice of data points

Step 2: Gathering Data

CEO writes or delegates to staff and vets reports through administrative cabinet

Step 3: Monitoring CEO Performance

CEO presents monitoring report

Board adjudicates report on the basis of

Compliance

Barrier Four: Failure to Communicate

The board and its CEO must communicate strongly and frequently that ***good is not good enough***. Excellent districts create and sustain an environment that demands continuous assessment and positive, constructive support for improvement.

The old communication paradigm was - send a newsletter or a press release. Put new goals on the website. Have a community meeting. Do "Back to School Nights". Deliver a rally call at the staff development kick-off for the new school year.

Good, but not good enough. The communication from the board about its singular focus on student results must be consistent and repetitive, day by day, hour to hour. Each business meeting, each speech to the chamber and the council, each visit to schools, each reply to a disgruntled parent, and each and every discussion with the CEO and staff about achievement – begin with a re-grounding in the board's focus on student results.

If the board expects change to be embraced by the community, the board must communicate with its community. The establishment of on-going dialogue about the board's results; the changes to anticipate; honestly asking for help in diagnosing problems and barriers; encouraging the asking of questions for understanding before launching excoriating attacks; engaging support in advocacy efforts at local, state and federal levels. Most critically, the board needs to ask parents how it can engage them most actively in their child's education.

The successful board of trustees reaches out and works with the people it represents, serves and leads. That work cannot be accomplished if the board relies solely on out-going messages and interaction with self-selected board meeting attendees.

The staff and community must hear and see a board's long-term commitment to student achievement. The board must use every vehicle to communicate its vision and focus. Aspen, CO has its mission and Results mounted in the board-room. Steamboat Springs, CO had a long-time board member, Matt Hermes, who consistently asked his colleagues and staff at meetings, "What does this have to do with student achievement? Is this the board's work?" Fairfax, VA has a highly interactive website for its large community, but is also undertaking intensive planning to work with community and parent groups around parent involvement and 21st Century skills.

Many interactive engagement strategies exist for boards to explore and use: Public Engagement from Harvard; Study Circles out of Connecticut; focus groups; survey monkey. We strongly urge boards to consider the advisability of retaining outside professional assistance to develop a communications and linkage plan to meet their needs.

The critical key to generating community understanding and support for board and district efforts is asking good questions, listening well, using the feedback, and circling back for more discussion.

Barrier Five: Failing to Build the Core and Remove Barriers

The board cannot undertake this transformation in isolation. The CEO will be central to internal adoption and external credibility. If the CEO is a barrier, a controller, a power and prestige monger, or one who cannot accept the added accountability, the board must recognize the fact that its vision may not be achieved under those circumstances.

The CEO must lead the organizational charge, including challenging traditional protocols, removing obstacles to change, confronting and redirecting time and people, redesigning professional development, and activating new levels of freedom and accountability. S/he is the internal organizational torch bearer.

Board members must build unity at their level and the CEO must go shoulder-to-shoulder in the change process and vision. But not alone. This transformation team must include senior staff, critical principals, union leadership, even community business and civic leaders who will support and advocate for the change efforts on an intimate level.

We have seen districts where the change process is delegated to a staff member: the board clerk, the director of strategic planning, the chief of staff. It doesn't work. This kind of revolutionary work requires the visibility, urgency, strength and extraordinary commitment of the senior executive with strong support from the senior administrative team. Failure to form this team means little - if any - real change will take place. **It is the pretense of progress.**

Successful change teams we have witnessed are making headway through reaching out, engaging in team training together, sharing and listening and problem solving in new ways.

In Columbus OH, the board and staff are working with the business community and union leadership in concentrated retreat sessions and subsequent strategy committees to build a coalition focused on strengthening the district and bolstering student achievement for this diverse community.

In Austin, TX, the CEO and senior staff led the charge for system-wide training for all staff, at all levels, to assure top-to-bottom understanding of their expectations in the board's new governing culture.

In Horry County SC, the superintendent worked with community groups to build support for board governance and for system integrity. In addition, she and her senior staff were able to realign staff development and conduct twice-yearly evaluations to offer support to each teacher's efforts to increase student achievement in alignment with the board's results. The team included every principal. *Without site support, systemic change will not happen.*

Barrier Six: Failure to Keep it Understandable

Sometimes boards get so focused on their new governance and its unique nomenclature that they forget there is a community of "lay people" who care about good governance, but want to hear about your vision and purpose in plain language. Governance preoccupation and lexicon can get in the way of citizens' understanding that it is not the governance process you want them to focus on, but rather your vision for and necessary steps to achieve excellent student achievement.

Some talk about the "7/11" test. Can you say what your vision for student achievement is within five minutes and without the need for a dictionary? Can you remove the immediate human tendency to gravitate to the negative when they hear something different by focusing on the common-sense presentation of your expectations?

If you can't state it simply ... there will be no listening, no support and eventually, no change.

Barrier Seven: Forgetting to Address the Legacy

If sustainable change is to embed itself into the fabric of the organization, the values and vision and systems put in place by the board and its team must outlive the current players. This calls for conscious planning for the recruitment and training of new board members. It also demands great forethought and preparation for recruitment and hiring of new staff, beginning with the CEO.

We live in a republic, a democracy. But as a governing board, it is totally reasonable to cultivate and aggressively seek out community members to run for election who can engage with the board and district in a constructive manner. The Power of One never ceases to amaze us – to undermine, to sabotage – or to inspire, to exert new levels of leadership. A single member can do amazing good within a group of five, seven or nine, but a single member can be equally harmful to the effective performance of a board. It is the case for not leaving fate to chance, but increasing the odds of sustainable and continuous improvement.

The change process is untidy and non-linear. Good ideas will come from good people. The challenge is for the board to seek out and accept and embrace the constructive, effective ideas and people.

The superintendent has worked hand in glove with the board. But with retirement or job change, who fills that pivotal role? Failure to consider recruiting a CEO who understands that his or her role is to make YOUR vision succeed can spell disaster for your change effort. Where do you recruit? Does the search firm understand your vision and how you do business? What does advertising language sound like? What kind of critical questions must be asked during the interview?

One extremely sophisticated and cultured district comes to mind that did not pay attention to the true quality of its final candidate – beyond *his* pretense. Within one year, the board was floundering. No board wants to conduct a CEO search twice in a year! Its governance focus and processes have yet to recover.

Barrier Eight: Ignoring Successes

The education profession is known for its inability to recognize and then celebrate successes. And yet,

Barriers—conclusion

educators and politicians alike know better than anyone else that encouragement increases performance.

Boards often focus on what's wrong. Why not try, what's right? It is all in the balance, but the scales too often are tipped to the negative: "You could have done better or different."

Let's get real. Boards must identify the shorter term targets that mean reasonable progress is being made, and celebrate them when they occur. The transformation to high performance is hard work, and to some, foreign work. The accountability level is threatening.

Plan for, encourage, support, and praise the short-term successes to sustain momentum. The next day, with its new challenges, will come with the dawn.

Our life's work is based on hoping, believing and coaching boards and their CEO's to break down the traditional barriers and beliefs and get laser-focused on student achievement.

It is a formidable change for many districts. But we also know and believe that this country is populated with people who want to make a sustainable and constructive difference in public education.

Recognizing and removing barriers, externally or internally imposed, will augment the chances for successful improvement and attainment of that audacious vision you have for every student to achieve. ■

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Linda J. Dawson and Dr. Randy Quinn founded The Aspen Group International Inc. in 1993 following careers that combine to total over 50 years of service to education and other non-profit and corporate Boards. They work with clients across the United States, in Malaysia and Singapore, Asia and Africa, as well as clients from Central and South America and the Caribbean.

Linda and Randy serve as consultants and coaches to governing boards and their senior staff in creating and sustaining good governance and leadership. Their work now centers primarily in Coherent Governance, but includes other services as well:

- **Complete PG and CG services: overview seminars, custom projects, implementation training, sustained coaching, linkage training and consulting, networking with fellow practitioners**
 - board and executive coaching;
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 - community engagement training;
 - team building and conflict management.

Our article on Change sprung not only from our own experience, observation and consultation, but from articles we've collected over the years. **Achieving Excellence—Barriers to Change** is designed specifically for public school boards and their CEOs. We would like to recognize in particular the following authors:

William Bridges and Associates: *The 5 Steps of Managing Change 1992*

Gary Hamel, professor at London Business School and C.K. Prahalad, at the Graduate School of Business Administration, University of Michigan in an article adapted for the Harvard Business Journal from their article, *Competing for the Future*.

John P. Kotter, retired Harvard Business School professor, *Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail*, published in the Harvard Business Review in the spring of 1995 and again in January of 2007.

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