

PEAK PERFORMANCE

Practical Strategies, Resources,
Processes, and Wisdom for
Governing Boards and their CEOs

Leading a High-Performing Board---Coherently

The board president has what many believe to be one of the more thankless jobs a person can have. What is required to lead a board of diverse individuals, all of whom are leaders in their own right?

Being president of anything isn't easy. Just ask George W. Bush or Barack Obama--who likely has figured that out already. While trying to lead a school board may not be quite as daunting as leading a country, it carries its own challenges, which some equate to trying to herd butterflies or cats.

There are good reasons for the leadership challenge facing school board presidents. As mentioned above, members of school boards all are leaders themselves; otherwise, they likely would not have been elected or appointed. Some members hold the view that they now serve a defined, narrow "constituency," as opposed to a broad ownership. Some consider themselves to be better leaders than the elected president, and therefore refuse to follow the lead. Still other members may lack the skills to contribute to the good of the board, but yet here they are, members with equal standing whose votes and influence count as much as the strongest member. And finally, there are those who simply are contrarians, whose views of the world are by nature opposed to those of any chosen leader.

Quite a challenge for the member who has been honored by having been selected to lead. So just how does the president begin to get arms around such a challenge? Experience over the years has given us some lessons that may be helpful to the president as he or she takes on this challenge. Here are some of them:

- **Develop a shared vision for board and district work.** Believe it or not, groups do tend to follow leaders who they believe know where they want to go, and have at least some general idea about how to get there. It's called "the vision thing," and when it doesn't exist, no compelling direction is taken.

Boards without a shared vision for their work and a plan for accomplishing it simply are marking time, usually being whipsawed by every external challenge thrown at them. Sometimes visionary leadership will emerge from members of the board other than the president, which is o.k. But the president still has a job to do to forge those views into a shared vision of the entire board. Without such a shared vision, boards can find themselves at the mercy of the immortal philosopher, Yogi Berra, whose advice was, "When you get to a fork in the road, take it."

- **Follow the rules.** Boards have rules of the game; at least all of our client boards do. Those rules must mean something, and the way to establish meaning is to follow them consistently. Speaker talks too long? End it on time. A member is disrespectful to another, or to the CEO, in public? Don't allow it to go unchallenged. The debate unfocused or off subject? Call a halt to it. A random stream of consciousness crops up during a targeted debate? Get things back on track. Otherwise, the entire group loses focus and discipline, valuable time is wasted, and public and staff confidence in your ability is eroded.
- **Know parliamentary procedure, and use it.** There is a good reason why "Robert's Rules of Order" has more than 5 million copies in use today: deliberative bodies need some clear rules (see above paragraph) about how they will organize discussion and action. Boiled down to their simplest state, the rules really are pretty simple

and logical: start the discussion with a motion; get a second to assure that more than one person wants to discuss the matter; discuss and amend, if desired--with votes on amendments taken in reverse order; and vote on the final motion. Of course, there are a few additional rules that must be understood, but they all fall into the common sense category, once understood. When the rules are not understood or violated is when the board becomes unfocused and unproductive. It is the president's job to know the rules of the game inside and out, and assure that all members have a general understanding of how debate and action will be guided. A wise parliamentarian once said, "Those who don't know the rules find themselves at the mercy of those who do." He was right.

- **Don't assume power you don't have...but use the power you do have.** All of our clients have a policy defining the job responsibilities of the president. The provisions generally are not controversial nor confusing, but sometimes they seem to be disregarded. Some presidents take actions that go well beyond the authority granted by the board in policy. If this happens, those actions should be challenged by the full board. Inappropriate actions we see include acting as the overseer of the superintendent or redirecting staff work.

But more often, we see presidents failing to take action prescribed by the authority that has been granted by the board in policy. For example, the board has charged the president with the job of assuring that all board action and discussion are consistent with the board's policy definition of board work. The board has empowered the president to assure that the board's discussions are efficient and productive. Too often presidents fail to take action to assure these results. It's hard to call members out of order, or to bring a halt to random discussions that are off track, or to question whether something a member is passionate about really falls within a reasonable definition of board work. But effective presidents, operating within the authority the board has given them, should do just that. Members may show anger or disappointment at the time, but the entire board will welcome the discipline.

- **Be fair to all members, but keep the group's effectiveness at the top.** Some board members refuse to be led. A few choose to "do their own thing," regardless of what the board wants to do. They have their own agendas and rules, and, if allowed to, will dominate the lives of the other members and disrupt the board's work. Hopefully, your board never will face such circumstances, but we have seen it happen numerous times. The president must allow full board discussion of a member's perspective and lead board deliberation of its inclusion. But it cannot allow such errant behavior to effect the performance of the entire board. Of course, the full board must take action to control its own destiny, but the role of the president is crucial as the board deals with such disruptions. This is another example of the importance of group rules and the necessity of applying them consistently--yet fairly.

If you are the president of your board, you have assumed a position of honor. You also have been given a role that carries awesome responsibility, and sometimes falls short of that honored status you thought you might enjoy.

Your colleagues placed you where you are because they had faith that you would lead the group to a higher level of performance. Don't disappoint them; lead them. The well-being of a complex organization whose mission is supremely important is riding on your ability to do that work well. ■

William Van Atta, president
Racine Unified School District, Racine Wisconsin

“Are you sure you want to interview me? My first meeting is next week!”

The answer was yes. This is a president who is ready to tackle a big job, having given it much thought and actively preparing to play a leadership role over this past year. He threw his hat in the ring with his colleagues and has just been elected to chair the board for the next year.

We asked Bill to share his thoughts on the presidency, responding to the five points outlined in the preceding article.

Vision: He’s got a clear picture of where he intends for the board and district to head. He often starts his sentences with one word that we think locks in his thoughts and commands attention.

“Look. This board is committed to full implementation of Coherent Governance. It has been our infrastructure to sustain us through some large scale and community-wide controversies, significant board division and ultimately turnover, and a new superintendent. It is, in my view, the only way to govern a district.”

Step one: “Every member of our board will be more active in board work. Our two driving committees are Governance and Communications. Governance Committee is charged with development and oversight of our calendar - the calendar drives our work and our agendas. They will coordinate with our Board Executive Assistant to make sure staff is aligned and prepared to deliver quality reports, on-time and as scheduled. They are our conscience: the keeper of our policies, the driver for agenda/policy connections to our board job description of work, the scheduler of our retreats and self-assessments. They are our powerhouse - ramped up!”

“We are proud of our proactive linkages throughout the community. But we need to improve and do more of them. Our citizens need to know and understand our work as a board and district. We did 7-9 linkages last year. This year we need to double that amount as we demonstrate great fiscal responsibility while demanding higher levels of student achievement - for all students.

This board takes seriously its connection to who owns us - the good citizens of Racine. But we have a lot of diversification here and we need to get really smart about how to communicate throughout our system. We’ll be building a *board* strategic communications plan to increase our effectiveness. We’re looking at really using technology to be more effective and efficient, things like using our email database, further development of board work on the website and for contacts, and autodialers for voice mail contacts.”

Step two: “Build capacity as a board to fully govern. As a body we accept the responsibility for accountability to the community and to provide deliberative leadership to the district as we monitor operational activity for compliance with our values and judge student progress toward the Board’s defined Results. This is a serious business and we are being clear with staff, I am being clear as the president, that monitoring our values as stated in our policies will be rigorous and comprehensive. We are resolute in expecting clear interpretations and compelling evidence of compliance or progress. Our monitoring reports must improve - vastly this year - to meet our expectations.”

Follow the Rules: “I have a favorite quote by Sir Issac Newton pencilled on my notebook that I take to all board meetings. It is: *Tact is the knack of making a point without making an enemy.* Look. We’re a group of leaders. We have a job description that is daunting and a work load that is even more daunting. We don’t have time or energy for internal division, single agendas, lack of discipline or focus. I believe it is my job to make sure our time at meetings is professional, focused, disciplined. We have to be courteous to each other. We have to model what we would expect for our students when they work in a team. I’m resolute on this one.”

Know Parliamentary Procedure: “A given. It’s my job to chair meetings using that logic and understandable process. Thank goodness my vice-president, Sue Kutz, is committed to helping us stay faithful to our agenda and processes. Sue did a great job as president, knows our policies, knows the rules. And our Administrative Assistant, Darlene Gallup, keeps us on point.”

Exercise Authorized Power: “I’ve been elected by my peers. They expect me to execute my job as described by us in our policies. That will require my diligence in chairing meetings well, supporting board and member efforts, coordinating and calibrating our work flow and focus. I will do that job, ask for feedback and insight on how to improve, and laser in on building the board team. I’ll use muscle - if need be - to make sure this board performs as a governing team and the district performs to serve all students.”

Be fair, but focus on the whole team: “I’ll go back to my other answers. We are a board made up by individuals, each of us elected, to serve the whole district. Each person has my respect for what they have signed up to do for Racine’s children. Each member can expect a fair shake and their say. In the end, we have to pull together and get our work done. I’m serving a board who is committed to Coherent Governance and our desire to *govern with excellence*. That’s bigger than any one of us. Our self assessments will be conducted by all of us and just as rigorous as what we expect of staff. We need to model the behaviors and discipline we expect.”

A president’s thoughtful desire to lead well. A team poised for their work. A district working to improve student achievement. Look. It could be a great year!■

Coherent Governance®: Now a Registered Service Mark

It’s official! Our unique governing system for boards is now registered with the United States Patent and Trademark Office. When you hear the name Coherent Governance from now on, you can be sure it is the work of The Aspen Group. And, you can take pride in being part of this systemic, systematic, sustainable, flexible and owner accountable governance operating system! Congratulations!■

Professional Development for the Board Using Stimulus Funds

Monies may have been freed up in your district by the federal stimulus funds to continue your board’s professional development. Secretary Duncan is emphasizing the need for staff development. Duncan is also speaking out loudly and critically on the need for board reform. **You are ahead of the curve in Coherent Governance - but sustained coaching is critical to maintaining your governing excellence and integrity.** Cutting your development risks slippage back to non-governing. “Modeling cut backs” may be penny wise but pound foolish. Schedule consultation and coaching onto your Annual Calendar, GC-6 E. ■

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