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Building Relationships

Building effective board relationships is a continuous process. Whether a new or a seasoned veteran, the effective superintendent knows that building a solid board relationship takes priority. The position comes with endless high-priority tasks, of which the most essential is getting to personally know the board members and their interests, goals, and passions. All districts have established communication patterns, and new superintendents would be wise to honor these practices while mutually discovering new ways of assuring good communication through discussions and agreements with board members.

School board elections often bring many new challenges for superintendents. The introduction of new board members changes the composition and culture of the governance team. Whether board members are elected or appointed, the astute superintendent carefully analyzes the constituent groups represented by each board member to expand understanding of how to further build the relationships. An election also requires political astuteness and fine-tuning of relationships between and among other elected officials in the community. Whether a parent leader or community activist, an emerging politician or a former district employee, the unique perspective of each member must be carefully understood, embraced, and managed.

Building and nurturing a board member team focused on moving the district forward effectively and efficiently must be the centerpiece of the superintendent's daily work. In so doing, achievements of the past are honored and current board members' contributions to long-term goals are validated.

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Self-Assessment

- What data did you gather on the district, the board, and the community prior to accepting the position?
- What are your strengths and personal focus areas as a leader and how do you match with the needs of the district and board?
- Do you know which areas of district operations and other issues each board member finds of most interest?
- Have you spent personal time with each board member to understand the communication method preferred by each?
- What processes do you use to orient board candidates to the district and to help them understand their roles and responsibilities?
- Do you know the reasons board members are on the board, what their future aspirations are, and what they hope to accomplish during their period of board service?

THE FIRST STEP

One reason superintendent turnover is high in some districts is that school boards seldom know what or who they are looking for, other than a replacement superintendent. The all-too-common result? The wrong person for the wrong job.

—Fusarelli and Jackson, 2004, p. 56

Superintendents talk about the “match” with a board of education and a district when they accept a new position. It isn’t scientific, it is often nebulous, and yet superintendents know it is critical. When it is a match, they acknowledge that they can “feel it.” This “feel” evolves during the beginning steps in the communication process with a board. The first sense of how the board-superintendent relationship will work begins during the interview process. During the opening conversations, board members and candidates form first impressions and thoughts about one another. Board members assess whether the candidate meets their expectations in various areas—leadership, communication, business, instruction, personality, and style. During the interview process, the candidate also assesses how the board works with a superintendent, and gauges the dynamics among board members. When the chemistry clicks between the board and one candidate, it is a match. If it “feels” right to both parties, the superintendent is hired and the relationship grows in earnest.

Vignette

When a seven-year veteran superintendent decided to seek a new job, she interviewed in two districts. Although she was a finalist in both, she did not feel either position was right for her. Shortly thereafter, a search firm contacted her with a promising opportunity.

The superintendent did her homework on the district and found that it was an excellent district with high student achievement, stable leadership, and, most important to the candidate, a strong board of education. Believing her skills would be a match for the district, she applied.

During the first round of interviews, the superintendent felt at ease with board members. They appeared intelligent, thoughtful, and knowledgeable about education. When she left the interview, she called her husband to share her thoughts and reactions. She told him she felt she might get this job—it seemed right. Later that day, she was called back for the second interview, which also went well. This interview was more informal, with give and take between her and the board members as well as between the board members themselves. Their personalities came through and it seemed a bond was beginning to form. She became increasingly confident that this was the match she was seeking. A short time later, the search firm consultant contacted her and said that if she wanted the job the board would like her to meet with them to negotiate a contract. She did, and the relationship was under way.

During contract discussions, board members' styles emerged further. In their interactions, they displayed a warm sense of humor and camaraderie. They talked with her as a partner, not an employee, and she continued to feel at ease with the group and with the conversation. Her next opportunity to interact with the board members was when they visited her current district. After the visit, she knew she was making the right decision to go to the new district. Through each step of the application and interview processes and the site visit, the superintendent discovered the place she belonged.

Analysis

Effective use of the application and interview process allows superintendent candidates to determine whether the district is the right place for them. A good match enables superintendents to get off to a good start in their new district. Critical to this match is the relationship with the board members, and it soon becomes evident to a superintendent who watches and listens carefully. Although superintendents often generate enthusiasm for their next move, it can be disastrous if this compelling desire for a change supersedes objectivity and a measured analysis of the district

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under consideration. Although desiring a professional change, this superintendent wisely stepped back after her first two interviews, where she was a finalist, knowing that the match was simply not there. Her instincts told her that another opportunity would emerge more closely aligned to her long-term career goals, and that is precisely what happened.

Action Steps

1. Do thorough homework on the district's profile, learning as much as possible about all aspects of the performance levels, programs, organizational structure, successes, challenges, and focus areas.
2. Research the board's governance history, the backgrounds of former and current board members, learning as much as possible about their personal interests, goals, and personal and professional backgrounds.
3. Remember that the interview is about a match for both the board and you. Watch, listen to questions, and observe the interaction between and among the board members.
4. Trust your instincts; if it does not feel right, continue your search until you feel a connection with the community and the board.

UNDERSTANDING EACH BOARD MEMBER'S INTERESTS AND GOALS

The board-savvy superintendent makes governance a top priority. This means that the superintendent devotes the time required to become a true expert in this complex, rapidly changing field. He or she regularly dedicates a large chunk of time—somewhere in the range of 20 to 25 percent—to working directly with the board. The board-savvy superintendent is a board capacity builder par excellence.

—Eadie and Houston, 2003, p. 56

A strong board and superintendent partnership does not develop by chance. Such a partnership is grounded in the superintendent's respect for the opinions of each individual board member and communicating with each one regarding their interests and goals for the district.

Developing a structure for ongoing communication with each board member regarding their interests and goals is critical for the individual board member and to ensure the success of the whole team. Board members campaigned for the position, they committed to serving on the board, and they began their board service with high expectations, hopes,

and a sincere desire to serve their constituencies. Understanding their perspectives early in their board service provides a foundation for long-term trust between the superintendent and each board member. During board members' tenure in this important district role, they will benefit from ongoing communication, support, guidance, acknowledgment, and appreciation from the superintendent.

Vignette

During a celebratory reception for a retiring superintendent, board members saluted his contributions to the district. Each of the board members spoke of their personal relationship with the superintendent and his frequent communications with them about their personal interests and how he used these to move the district forward. One member noted the superintendent always spoke about the superintendent and board being a "team of six." Another member agreed and added that he felt individually validated by the superintendent because of his personal interactions with him. "Not once were my personal interests, goals, and dreams disregarded. I was listened to and valued. The superintendent always acknowledged and appreciated my perspectives and made them part of our district's direction. He did the same for my board colleagues."

These statements were testimony to the effectiveness of the superintendent in eliciting individual board members' interests and goals for their board service. The superintendent had a sense of responsibility to ensure that every board member was respected and reinforced for their efforts on behalf of the district. Although he spent much of this time learning about the personal interests of each board member, he continually reminded them that the role of the board is to act in the best interests of all people. His message was that the most highly respected public officials are those whose personal interests and goals are balanced with the interests of the collective whole in representing the entire community.

Analysis

Gathering data about individual board members' interests, their goals, and motivations for their work on behalf of the district's children and families is essential. Without frequent personal, focused, and relaxed conversations on these topics, the superintendent cannot fully understand each board member's motivation. The effective leader sets aside time with each board member to continually assess how they feel about their accomplishments in their board role and how their desires and actions reflect their personal and professional commitment to the district. On a

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day-to-day basis, as the work of the district proceeds at a relentless pace, it is imperative that the superintendent not let the frequent distractions interfere with the important superintendent and board communication link.

When transitions occur with superintendent and board member retirements, positive testimonials are often those moments when leaders reflect on relationships. When leaders acknowledge their departing colleague, what is said reflects the core accomplishments of the individuals who have led the district. It is clear that frequent, conscientious communication and acknowledgement of board members' personal goals and those of their colleagues were a fitting tribute to the retiring superintendent in the vignette.

Action Steps

1. Accept the superintendent–board member communication as fundamental work of the superintendent and place priority on frequent communication with each one.
2. Meet with each board member to learn of their personal goals and aspirations for their board service.
3. Write yourself a detailed memo called "Board Members' Interests." Refer to it often and update it frequently.
4. Establish a clear agreement with each board member regarding the communication process that works best for them and honor that process during the period of time that you work together.
5. Communicate with each board member frequently, using the model that is most effective to touch base and determine if there are any current special issues or interests for which they need information.

ADAPTING COMMUNICATION METHODS

To be successful one must be willing to learn and apply new concepts and not be afraid of change.

—Barry, 2004, p. 107

Loose systems of communication in a superintendent-board relationship do not work. A strong, clear plan of coordinated communications activities with the board is critical to a successful and dynamic relationship.

Whether the superintendent is brand new to the role or a transferring leader from another district, communication with the board is a priority.

For the experienced superintendent new to a district or a long-term superintendent in a district, it is refreshing for the governance team of board and superintendent to revisit, streamline, and continually seek ways to enhance methods of communication with the board to make the relationship even stronger. Documenting what is working and what areas of communication need focus is an important task to ensure a high level of shared knowledge.

Vignette

Consider the case of a new superintendent who comes from a district that relied heavily on written communication—a lot of it! In fact, every week, she produced a major weekly update that often looked like a novella. Although it was a lot of work, she felt comfortable writing. She liked having a hard copy of meeting agendas, district goals, budgets, and other documents. Because she used this communication style with her past board, she assumed she would implement this same type of weekly written plan in her new district.

As a veteran and highly experienced superintendent, she did her due diligence by interviewing board members to learn their current practices and the previous superintendent's communication strategies. What she found out was that this board was very much a next-generation board accustomed to e-communication of events, agendas, reports, and day-to-day communication. Despite feeling a little anxious about instituting a new approach and her own skill with technology, the superintendent forged ahead with a net-savvy communication plan.

She instituted daily e-mail messages with the subject line "Heads Up" to communicate important events, schedule changes, and school events. Each Monday, she responded to questions from board members about board agenda items via e-mail, and followed up with phone calls to board members who preferred to talk personally. She and the board president used e-mail to collaborate and finalize the board meeting agenda. Ultimately, the district moved to full digital agendas for board members and staff.

Analysis

The first step in adapting to a new professional environment is the diagnosis of the strategies, structures, and processes that work effectively within the new organization. The leader must be prepared to receive information that may suggest a different protocol from a previous communication style and may initially feel outside of the comfort zone.

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As was the case with our superintendent colleague adjusting to a process required by her new board, she was both challenged and strengthened by increased technological demands.

By accommodating board members' communication preferences, the superintendent was able to cultivate a culture of effective technology-based communication in her new district. Board members appreciated her willing attitude and genuine effort to make the superintendent-board relationship more productive, positive, and efficient. Board members who communicated with parents and community and business leaders felt confident because they knew in "real time" the district's direction and what was happening in the schools because of their immediate access to pertinent information. Because the board members had daily updates, they were more aware and appreciative of their superintendent's commitment to school visitations and her regular connections with principals, teachers, and students. Ultimately, this superintendent's communication plan enhanced the level of trust between her and the board, and it brought board members closer to the students they served.

Action Steps

1. Identify the types of communication you presently use and provide this information to the board.
2. Ask all board members to define the most effective strategies to ensure solid communication about district operations.
3. Decide as a group what system of communication will work best for each person, the total board, and for you.
4. Periodically evaluate your practices and adjust where appropriate.

ANOTHER ELECTION, ANOTHER CHALLENGE

Lay board members . . . frequently come to their positions with minimal understanding of the policy role of the board or the role of the individual members of a governing board.

—Spillane and Regnier, 1998, p. 209

Board elections are challenging for superintendents. Informing candidates of district focus areas prior to the election, and intensive training of the newly elected improve the person or persons' ability to succeed in the new role.

Experienced superintendents with an effectively functioning board love it when there is no election, but this is a rare occurrence. When faced

with an election, contentious or otherwise, superintendents help themselves and the district by thoroughly preparing every candidate for the roles and responsibilities of being a school board member. The preparation begins before the election with comprehensive candidate training and a professional development plan for the first year of board service.

Vignette

A veteran superintendent experienced six elections in her 10-year career. Her skills in board election candidate training improved over time. Facing her first election in her second district superintendency, she used her well-developed candidate preparation program.

Each of the district's divisions—instruction, business, and human resources—prepared information on the major aspects of their operations. The superintendent compiled a board candidate notebook that included the district's strategic plan, district goals, board by-laws, board processes, and other items related to current issues.

She scheduled board candidates' workshops after the filing period ended and never later than one month before the election. She invited all board members running for reelection and a current board member who was not up for reelection to provide the additional perspectives of experienced board members.

At the candidate workshop, the superintendent and assistant superintendents reviewed the contents of the notebook; shared the vision, direction, and operations of the district; and answered prospective board members' questions. As a follow-up, the superintendent offered to meet individually with board candidates to answer questions.

Time spent with candidates pays off whether or not the person is elected to the board because of the district knowledge they have gained. For the winners, the superintendent continued training after the election. Many state school boards' associations offer training for new board members. This superintendent attended these training sessions with the newly elected members so she could answer questions and relate information to their own district. Within the first six months of the new term, the superintendent had met several times individually with new board members. Periodically, she had the division leaders join them in meetings to provide ongoing education and to answer questions. This allowed other district leaders to demonstrate their leadership and knowledge. It also gave the superintendent another way to get to know the new board members by observing their interactions with staff. Following a division meeting, a new board member commented, "Between the pre-election communication and the meetings with each division, my learning curve has been cut in half."

Analysis

Preparation of board members begins before they are elected. Carefully gathered materials and structured presentations by board and district leaders help candidates learn what is expected of them should they be elected. Through this process, board members learn the culture of the district, and they gain a sense of confidence regarding their future responsibilities. Establishing a positive, open relationship with every candidate helps those who are elected be better prepared to join the governance team. Through the training process, they develop a greater depth of knowledge, which allows them to better inform their constituency regarding district operations.

Action Steps

1. With key staff, review and determine what materials will be most beneficial in helping potential new board members learn about the district and its operations.
2. Refine the materials so they are completely up-to-date, user-friendly, and not filled with educational jargon.
3. Ensure that workshop materials include job descriptions for board members and the superintendent that help to clearly delineate the roles and responsibilities of each.
4. Plan quality time for group and individual meetings and training with candidates.
5. Never stop training and informing board members.

POLITICAL FINE-TUNING

Leadership requires, at times, the willingness to explore ideas and concepts beyond the traditional ways we have always managed; the willingness to take chances, to fail, and to go right back and try again.

—Barry, 2004, p. 64

Did you ever feel like you were behind schedule and needed to act fast to avoid getting further behind? Did you ever want to do all of the preliminary work alone and surprise your board with a fail-proof plan to get out of a mess? Did you ever feel like you made the worst political blunder?

Superintendents are proactive—they are take-charge people and eager to make things happen in a positive, expeditious manner. When issues

surface, it is natural for superintendents to move forward decisively to address issues that face the district.

Vignette

A small, but rapidly growing school district faced massive issues. The new superintendent found that little long-range planning had been done. District officials had never applied for state funds to build schools; they had no developer fee arrangements, no long-term school facilities plans, and limited knowledge regarding resources available from the state.

For most of its existence, the district operated quite well because growth was minimal and only a few new students joined the district each year. Community members believed that the district would remain that way. One astute board member, however, had an opposite view. This board member started to talk about how things were going to change . . . a new freeway was going to be built through the community, the schools were going to become overcrowded, a shortage of teachers would occur, and so on. These observations were shared with the entire board, and the superintendent was directed to investigate the potential future growth and report back to the board in one month.

Being the “take-charge” person she was, the superintendent sprang into action. Among many things needing immediate attention, the superintendent decided the district had to acquire several pieces of property to build schools. After all her research, she concluded that a key person to consult prior to drafting a successful plan was the county supervisor who represented the district. Furthermore, she concluded that there were several ideal school sites, but what she did not know was whether there were “political” complications with any of these sites. She believed the supervisor would be the best person to advise her—especially because this person would have a broad perspective and represented the area of the school district.

The superintendent prepared for a meeting with the supervisor, tried to anticipate questions, and brought a map designating the sites she believed would be ideal for the school district to purchase. The meeting went well. The supervisor responded positively. In fact, he gave the superintendent a “mini” lesson in geography and politics, all of which confirmed to the superintendent that the supervisor was very familiar and knowledgeable about the district and the county. By the time the superintendent left, she had the assurance that the sites were appropriate, had contact names of developers and state facilities planning individuals, and a promise that the supervisor would attend the school board meeting when she would present the plan to the board.

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On the way back to the office, the superintendent called the board president to schedule a meeting to brief her on the meeting with the supervisor and to share preliminary details of the plan. The meeting took place two days later and that was when the superintendent's big communication error was exposed. The board president felt as if she had been hit by a lightning bolt. The superintendent had done more than make a simple mistake.

The board president and superintendent met at breakfast. After the usual exchange of pleasantries, the superintendent shared details about her meeting with the supervisor. She talked enthusiastically for several minutes. When she paused for a drink of water, she noticed a look on the board president's face she had never seen before. Was it pride, shock, surprise, or amazement?

"I can't believe you did such a stupid thing. Don't you know that the supervisor is running for reelection and will probably be opposed by one of our board members? Of course he was helpful, he wants to win and the problem you now have is that *your* board members will not want to use the county supervisor in any way that furthers his reelection effort."

The superintendent was speechless. Her local political inexperience had created a larger challenge than finding school sites. Through a great deal of hard work and newly acquired political skills, the superintendent made a quick correction in her course of action. The superintendent met with the board member with the "political aspirations," admitted her mistake, and sought her assistance on how to backtrack with the county supervisor. Her next step was to meet with the district staff to develop a comprehensive School Facilities Master Plan.

Analysis

This unintentional blunder taught the superintendent many lessons. Early on in a new position, it is imperative to work closely with the board in defining the most compelling challenges facing the district and any related political implications. Although the superintendent's intentions were meant to be outreach efforts to the community, the first constituent group to work closely with must always be the board. Investigating, gathering, and defining issues from the board's perspective must always be the first step in a new environment. "Take-charge" leadership must be tempered by thorough investigation, good information from many sources, comprehensive procedures, and common sense. When inevitable "bad news" issues do arise, it is essential to immediately share the news with the school board and at the same time demonstrate a detailed action plan focused on addressing the problem.

Action Steps

1. Use the board as your first source for defining challenging issues facing the district.
2. Be complete in researching, gathering detailed facts, and considering related political implications.
3. Talk to each board member to elicit information about the history of the district and its community and encourage them to divulge the local subtleties of the issues facing the district.
4. Even when pressed with an urgent problem, take your time to be thorough and thoughtful and cross check your knowledge with the board president to avoid surprises.

THE HIDDEN JOB DESCRIPTION

Conflicts can be destructive not only interpersonally, but organizationally as well. Breaking the downward spiral of unresolved organizational conflicts . . . requires leadership and courage.

—Cloke and Goldsmith, 2000, p. 9

When board members hire a new superintendent, they have typically discussed with one another the detailed qualities they desire for their new leader. Members come to consensus on such things as background, education, and experience. Topics not often discussed are the “other things” that individual board members believe a superintendent should do. These elusive “other things” sometimes have the greatest impact on a superintendent’s relationship with an individual board member or the whole board. In the period prior to finalizing an employment agreement, it is prudent to define these unwritten guidelines when possible.

Vignette

After nine years as a successful superintendent, a veteran accepted a position with a small city district. She met with all board members to discuss their expectations of her and what they would like to see her accomplish. After her meetings, she thought she understood what it was they wanted.

A few weeks after the superintendent’s arrival, one of the board members came into her office to let the superintendent know that she

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was not happy with some of the new superintendent's initial actions. The superintendent was flabbergasted. She had no idea what she had done wrong, but was eager to hear what the board member had to say.

The board member said she expected that when she walked into the superintendent's office that the superintendent would stand up and greet her formally. The superintendent was not to speak with any elected official on topics that related to the district unless a board member was with her. The board member shared that she thought it inappropriate for someone who was not an elected official, such as the superintendent, to talk to an elected official about district issues. Further, she stated that she expected the superintendent to host her lunches when they went out and to purchase her alcoholic beverages at receptions that they might attend together. The board member concluded with her concerns about the superintendent's attire, indicating that she expected the superintendent to dress more professionally.

Stunned and at a loss for words, the superintendent thanked the board member for her comments and then told her she would schedule a follow-up meeting with her. The superintendent immediately called the board president. The board president expressed concern about her colleague's comments and told the superintendent that the rest of the board did not feel this way and she would support the superintendent in whatever way she felt she needed to handle the one board member. She also explained that this had happened to the last superintendent.

After considering the situation, the superintendent decided it was time for her to set a meeting and have her "there is a difference between public servant and servant" discussion with the one board member. The superintendent talked about roles and responsibilities of a superintendent and asked the board member why she felt as she did. The board member's only comment was to reiterate her personal opinion regarding what she expected of a good superintendent.

The superintendent replied that she would treat the board member with respect in the same manner as other people who came into her office, she was responsible for meeting with many individuals, and she could not be hampered by restrictions on who she could or could not speak with. She also told the board member that it was not the superintendent's job to buy food or alcoholic beverages for her or any board member. The superintendent reminded her that she worked for the board as a whole; she was their employee, not their servant, and that only the whole board could give her direction regarding job responsibilities.

After the meeting, the board member never brought up these issues again, but the relationship between the superintendent and this one board member remained strained throughout the superintendent's tenure.

Analysis

Although this interaction borders on the incredible in a professional environment, board members often have unique perspectives on the personalized job descriptions they have for their relationship with a superintendent. Following the meeting regarding the “other things” outlined by the board member, it was important to immediately communicate with the board president regarding the needs of this board member and increased understanding and consistency in expectations from all board members. Making certain that all members understand that the superintendent works with the entire board is a guideline that needs to be revisited periodically with all board members. Although a situation similar to this scenario would likely be rare or at least not this extreme, it is imperative to make an effort to understand the unique preferences and needs of each individual and balance these needs with the entire leadership body.

Action Steps

1. Gather data regarding board members’ preferred communications methods.
2. Work with the board as a whole to set acceptable working norms.
3. Develop and define with the entire board a strategy for diplomatically dealing with individual board members whose needs may differ from those of the board as a whole.
4. Establish a commitment from the board that this strategy will be immediately implemented should there evolve what the superintendent determines to be unreasonable or unacceptable expectations.

THE BOARD MEMBER WHO WANTS TO BE GOVERNOR

I try to hear things through the ears of others, and see things through their eyes.

—Barry, 2004, p. 37

School board members come to their role for many reasons. Most board members are motivated to serve because of their love of children or their commitment to their community and/or to public education. A member whose true motivation is a step to higher political office often creates different dynamics among board members, some of which are negative. Despite varying motivations, the superintendent’s role is to help all members to be as effective in their roles as possible. The

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superintendent does this by knowing and using the strengths of each board member.

Vignette

After 15 years in a previous district, an experienced superintendent moved to a new district, where she needed to adapt to a new culture. The new board had seven strong and committed members. One was a young man of 34 who had surprised the community by being elected the year before she arrived. At the time of his election, he was new to the area and had no knowledge of the history of the conservative, traditional town.

In the previous superintendent's last year, he had dealt with an ugly issue with one of the high schools, made more difficult by media attention. It fell to the outgoing superintendent to resolve. In contrast to the other board members who were troubled by the situation and the media hype, the young board member enjoyed the publicity. He seemed to relish the attention personally, no matter what it meant for the district.

At one of the first board meetings with the new superintendent, the young board member questioned whether the previous superintendent should have shared the high school situation with the board prior to its becoming public. He also brought forward a recommendation that the board consider changing the retirement agreement with the previous superintendent, a man who had successfully led the district for 12 years. The new superintendent and the other board members were completely taken by surprise. No one was happy. They managed to get through the meeting, but it was not a pleasant experience.

A few days later, the superintendent met with this young man and told him to never surprise her or his board colleagues like that again. She explained that it was her responsibility to gather information for him as she did for every board member so he would not have to ask such sensitive and potentially volatile questions in a public forum.

As she and the staff worked with him during his continuing board tenure, she began to understand the young man's actions as an ongoing need for name recognition because his ultimate plan was to run for higher office beyond his elected role in the local community. State office—maybe even governor—was his goal, and he was willing to do almost anything to have his name out in front.

The other board members recognized this and were not very supportive. They were local people who wanted board members who were devoted only to local community service. This young board member's behavior was foreign and unwelcome. The young member was bright, personable when he wanted to be, and focused on building a coalition of supporters. The superintendent's goal was to work

with the other board members to recognize this young man's strengths and not let his political ambitions get in the way of the total board working to accomplish the district goals.

Fortunately, the superintendent established a good working relationship with the young man and helped him become a better board member. She worked hard to reduce the potential for "surprises" from the young member. The positive side of his political ambition was the fact that as an active and visible board member, he attended events and spoke positively about the district. In many ways, he helped the district raise its profile throughout the area.

The superintendent learned to enjoy this young go-getter. His intelligence and wit was often combined with warmth and caring. The superintendent was able to acknowledge that the young board member was ambitious and not to assume his larger goal was a negative one for her or the district. She also assisted other members to get past his personal ambition and recognize the skills he brought to the board. It was not always easy, as he sometimes caused the district to be "out there" in the public eye. Nevertheless, her acceptance and understanding of his motivations enabled her to turn a difficult and potentially explosive situation into one that strengthened the district.

Analysis

Superintendents must discover and use the strengths each board member brings to the governance team and the district. They need to understand board members' motivations, knowledge, and skills. If one or more member is politically motivated, the superintendent needs to determine how that ambition might benefit the district.

When superintendents take time to know each member and their personal and political goals, they can coach and assist each person to become a better board member. Superintendents can also help all board members acknowledge the strengths that each other member of the governance team brings to the board's effectiveness.

Action Steps

1. Meet with each board member and learn their personal motivations for being on the board.
2. Develop a good relationship with each board member and build on it to coach each person to be a better board member.

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3. Talk to each board member about the strengths of each of the other members.
4. When political motivation gets in the way of board effectiveness, work with the member involved to contribute to the team; political ambitions and board member effectiveness can be compatible.

HONORING PAST BOARD MEMBER ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Each of us can look back upon someone who made a great difference in our lives, often a teacher whose wisdom or simple acts of caring made an impression upon us at a formative time. In all likelihood, it was someone who sought no recognition for their deed, other than the joy of knowing that, by their action, another's life had been made better.

—Zadra, 1999, p. 86

There is nothing more inspirational than learning the history of our school districts and honoring past leadership. Acknowledgement of the contributions, devotion, and dedication of those individuals who have preceded present leaders is a characteristic of ethical leadership.

Whether a school district is twenty, forty, or sixty years old, each has a unique and exciting history. Pioneering and courageous board members have furthered the mission of schooling in their communities over the years. They have contributed to school district progress. The superintendent-board team should acknowledge their legacy and contributions when talking about the accomplishments of the district. It is powerful when a superintendent recognizes the historical contributions of those who have led before. Validation of the past and a sincere appreciation for those who have given years of collective leadership to bring the district to its present status sends a strong symbolic message to present employees that they too create a legacy for those to follow.

Vignette

During the dedication of a new performing arts building in a district, the previous superintendents and board members were the centerpiece of the celebration. These twenty-plus participants were highly visible with their corsages and boutonnieres. Community members greeted and thanked them as they were walked down a “red carpet” entryway on the arms of current students. There was not a dry eye in

the house! Dreams for this performing arts center had been forefront in the minds of members of this community for many years. Hundreds of people contributed their expertise, their ideas, and their personal funds, but the fiscal challenges of launching such a project in a small town had been daunting. After several years of effort, however, the performing arts facility was a reality and it was opened with a lavish ceremony. The involvement of the present students in hosting and honoring the previous board members was a visible cross-generational collaboration. The superintendent made certain that the entire community acknowledged the hard work and dedication of the previous district leaders and generated spirit for what the community had accomplished together. In the process, his own credibility was strengthened.

A similarly exhilarating event occurred in another district that celebrated the reopening of a renovated auditorium that had been named in honor of a previous superintendent who had retired from the district after a stellar career. Although the auditorium had long been named after the retired superintendent, most current employees had no knowledge of the character and the contributions of this man. When the auditorium reopened, the current high school principal walked the 80-year-old superintendent down the long aisle to the podium and the entire district staff, former board members, principals, superintendents, and colleagues from throughout the state cheered as the high school band played "Hail to the Chief!" Once again, the celebration moved the audience to tears and brought the district and community together.

Analysis

There are countless opportunities for superintendents to acknowledge the contributions of past boards and past administrators. For one, superintendents can deliver speeches to describe the history of the organization and explain how present buildings, traditions, policies, and procedures are a result of those who provided the early leadership. See the Action Steps below for more ideas.

Action Steps

1. Consider sharing a "tidbit of history" during board meetings that relates to the origin of a significant district tradition.
2. Consider a "Did you know?" list of highlights sharing the accomplishments of present and past board members.

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3. Invite previous board members to leadership and board meetings to speak about the history of the district.
4. Find opportunities to invite and honor previous board members at special events.

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING NEVER ENDS

Still I am learning . . .

—Michelangelo, quoted in Zadra, 1999, p. 114

Superintendents quickly learn that building a relationship with each board member is a critical foundation for working together with the entire board as a governance team. They learn that establishing personal relationships helps the team weather uncertain and challenging times and it helps keep everyone focused on their unity of purpose and common vision for the organization on a day-to-day basis.

Relationship building only happens with conscious effort and nurturing a commitment to honor individual contributors. It is a beneficial investment of time and energy to schedule regular face-to-face meetings with board members for the express purpose of getting to know them, their concerns, and their hopes for the future. Regular meetings also help the superintendent stay in touch with the board members' points of view on specific issues in the school district and the community.

Vignette

A veteran superintendent, who thought she was usually well-informed about her board members' positions on issues and concerns, was invited to lunch by a board member to discuss whether he would run for office for a second term. He was part of the original board that hired her and they had worked well together for the past four years. She saw him as a responsible, skillful, and thoughtful board member and was anxious for him to be reelected.

She arrived at the lunch meeting prepared with three reasons why he should run again: his continued involvement would maintain a stable board focused on improving student achievement and closing the achievement gap; he possessed strong diplomacy and negotiating skills that helped the board work through contentious issues and disagreements in a spirit of teamwork; and, even though they occasionally disagreed, she enjoyed working with him. They had the same

goals and expectations for the district, and he clearly understood the distinction between the role of the superintendent and the role of board members.

When she finished her list, he was quiet for a moment and said: "Oh, that isn't what I wanted to talk about at all. What I want to know is what are your plans for the future?" He went on to explain that he didn't want to stay on the board if she was planning to leave during his second term. He did not want to go through the stress and challenge of finding a new superintendent and investing time getting to know one and starting over to get the governance team focused.

As she listened to the board member talk, she realized that he was looking at this decision from a totally different point of view from hers; it renewed her awareness of how important it is to continuously communicate with board members and not assume that you know their thoughts or positions on every issue. Relationship building never ends.

Analysis

The superintendent's ability to build strong relationships with each board member is essential to the success of the governance team, and ultimately of the district. Once a relationship is established, however, the superintendent must not assume she understands the board members' perspectives and expectations on all issues. Regular opportunities to talk with and listen to each board member are critical.

Action Steps

1. Make a conscious effort to get to know each board member individually to understand the issues and concerns of each person through regularly scheduled individual meetings.
2. Do not assume to know board members' positions on issues.
3. Provide opportunities at board retreats and social events for you and the board members to share personal anecdotes, reflections, and dreams with one another.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Establishing a trusting and collaborative relationship between school board members and between the board and superintendent is one of the

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highest and most essential priorities for the superintendent of schools. To build trust within an organization, the superintendent must continually focus on coaching, training, and responding to board members' needs. Board members were chosen by their communities to establish policies for local public schools, and it is a fundamental aspect of the superintendent's job to guide these individuals through the maze of legal mandates, instructional expectations, and the myriad of policies that focus on moving the district forward in meeting the varying needs of its students and the families they represent.

This foundation of trust is built from the earliest steps when board members first consider adding board service to their final job responsibilities after many years of experience. The responsibility for their success lies in the ability of superintendents to guide and focus their board members on developing policies and procedures that provide the most exceptional environments for student learning and for hiring the most talented professionals. The depth of trust between boards and superintendents is reflected in the success of students who matriculate through their 13 years of education in our nation's schools.

To ensure that the relationships are developed and maintained through the superintendent and boards' tenure, it is important to develop effective strategies, including

- Learn every aspect about the district that you will lead prior to accepting a new position to ensure that the partnership between the board and the superintendent is a personal and professional match.
- Spend time with individual board members to learn of their personal goals and aspirations for their board service.
- Establish clear agreements with board members regarding the communication links that will be the most effective match for each member's personal style and preference.
- Welcome new members to the board and spend time providing them with detailed orientation materials and an opportunity to ask questions so they understand all aspects of the district's operation. Continue educating board members throughout their tenure.
- Assess all aspects of challenging issues facing the board and communicate with the members so they are not surprised or blindsided by any actions.
- Develop written guidelines, protocols, and norms regarding personal expectations that board members have for the superintendent so there is clarity and understanding among all parties.
- Facilitate collaborative relationships among all board members, acknowledging individual strengths and contributions to the board as a collective body.

- At every opportunity, acknowledge and recognize the past leaders of the district as a way to honor their individual contributions.
- Celebrate the board and superintendent partnership with retreats and social events that focus on building relationships that will lead to more effective work on behalf of students.