Role of the School Board Chair

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OSBA Executive Director
Summer Board Conference 2015
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Agenda:
- Legal and traditional duties of the board chair
- Role of the board chair
- Conducting the Meeting
  - Agenda
  - Parliamentary Procedure
  - Resources
Symptoms of an Ineffective Board Meeting

AGENDA

1. Call to Order and Roll Call
2. Special Presentations
   - Mr. Brown, Science Teacher - Tower Middle School
3. Public Comments
4. Consent Agenda
   - Minutes
   - N/A
   - Contract Items
   - Contract with new principal
5. Approve Building Conference - P.S. gym
6. Monitoring District Performance
   - State Assessment 2014 - Grades 5 and 6
   - New Mathematics Program - Grades 3 and 6
The Meeting Room

Which seating arrangement is most conducive to a successful meeting?

Efficiency Tip #1

*It All Starts Here …*

Setting the Agenda
Efficiency Tip #2

Process Counts....

Conducting the Meeting

Public Participation During Board Meetings
Basic Principles of Robert’s Rules of Order

“Any presiding officer will do well to bear in mind that no rule can take the place of tact and common sense on the part of the chairman . . .”

Section 47, Robert’s Rules of Order (10th edition)

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Basic Principles of Robert’s Rules of Order

- One thing at a time, one person at a time, one time per meeting
- Silence implies consent
- No surprises
- Right to know what will be discussed
- Everyone is equal (including the chair)
- Over and under dedication to Robert’s Rules can be disastrous
- All discussions should be germane to the pending question
- No interruptions
- Majority rules – usually

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Does Your Board Really Need To Follow Robert’s Rules of Order?

In small boards (less than 12), most Parliamentary Rules apply, but certain modifications permitting greater flexibility and informality are commonly allowed.

Robert's Rules of Order, 10th edition
Page 9, Line 21
Efficiency Tip #3
Handling motions and amendments

Adopting a Motion
There are six steps for adopting a motion.

Step 1 A member makes a motion
Step 2 A member seconds a motion
Step 3 The chair states the question
Step 4 The members debate
Step 5 The members vote
Efficiency Tip #4

Trouble Spots for Boards

Amending Motions

I move that we paint the boardroom green.

I would like to amend the motion by striking the word green and inserting the word yellow.

I move to amend the amendment by inserting the word bright in front of yellow.

I wish to insert the word bright in front of green.

Out of Order

Main Motion

Procedural Motion

Secondary

Out of Order

Primary Amendment

Close debate

I move to amend the amendment by inserting the word bright in front of green.

I would like to amend the motion by striking the word green and inserting the word yellow.

I move that we paint the boardroom green.
I move that we paint the boardroom green YELLOW.

Main Motion

I move to amend the amendment by inserting the word bright in front of the word yellow. (Fails)

Primary Amendment

I would like to amend the motion by striking the word green and inserting the word yellow. (Passes)

Secondary Amendment

Close debate

Procedural Motion

Minutes

“School boards are groups that take hours to produce minutes.”

Mark Twain

In order to conduct successful meetings, the school board should consider having written operating processes agreed upon by the board and superintendent. Topics may include, but are not limited to:

1. Preparation of the board meeting agenda
2. Preparation for meetings
3. Questions about the agenda items
4. Meeting procedures
5. Public participation during meetings
6. Communication between board meetings
7. Responses to community or employee complaints
8. Communication with the media
9. New member orientation
For more information

http://www.osba.org  search for “Board Chair”
http://www.osba.org/Resources/Article/Ask_Betsy.aspx
OSBA Public Meetings Law, Board Meetings and Executive Sessions
NSBA Becoming A Better Board Member, available from OSBA

Questions
Board Officers

At its first scheduled meeting after July 1, the Board will elect one of its members to serve as chair and one to serve as vice chair. No member of the Board may serve as chair more than four years in succession. If a Board member is unable to continue to serve as an officer, a replacement will be elected immediately. The replacement officer will serve the remainder of the officer’s term until the following July.

The Board chair will:

1. [Work with the superintendent to] [Direct the superintendent to] establish the agenda for regular Board meetings;
2. Call special meetings when required;
3. Preside at all meetings of the Board and enforce the rules of order;
4. Sign the minutes and other official documents that require the signature of the chair;
5. Represent the district and the Board at official functions, unless this duty is delegated by the Board chair to another Board member;
6. Appoint all committees [and will be an ex-officio member of all such committees] unless otherwise ordered by the Board;
7. Have the right to discuss issues and vote.

In the absence, incapacitation or death of the chair, the vice chair will perform the duties of chair and, when so acting, will have the chair’s powers. The vice chair will perform other functions as designated by the Board.

The superintendent will designate a staff member to serve as Board secretary and will directly supervise and evaluate the secretary. The secretary to the Board will take notes at Board meetings, compile minutes and perform related work as assigned by the superintendent or requested by the Board chair. These duties will include, but not be limited to, the following:

1. Record the disposition of all matters on which the Board considered action;
2. Prepare and distribute minutes in advance for approval at the next Board meeting;
3. Maintain properly authenticated official copies of the minutes;
4. Maintain the official record of Board policies;

5. Properly post all Board meetings.

**Board or District Spokesperson**

The Board may appoint one of its members, usually the chair, or another person to make authorized statements to the public or the media when the Board deems that, under the circumstances, the district’s position should be articulated by a single voice. The spokesperson serves at the Board’s direction and may be removed or replaced at any time by action of the Board.

**END OF POLICY**

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**Legal Reference(s):**

- ORS 255.335
- ORS 332.040
- ORS 332.045
- ORS 332.057
Board Meeting Procedures

1. **Quorum**

   A quorum will consist of the majority of the Board members.

2. **Vote Needed for Exercise of Powers**

   The affirmative vote of a majority of Board members will be necessary for exercising any of the Board’s powers.

3. **Board Member Voting**

   Each member’s vote on all motions will be recorded in the minutes.

4. **Abstaining from Vote**

   If a Board member chooses to abstain from voting, and the abstention is due to a conflict of interest, the Board member will state the reason for the abstention and such abstention will be recorded.

5. **Parliamentary Procedure**

   Official Board business will be transacted by motion or resolution at duly called regular or special meetings.

   Except as otherwise provided by state law and/or Board policy, the rules of parliamentary procedure comprised in *Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised*, “Procedure in Small Boards” as modified by the Board will govern the Board in its deliberation. Modifications will include the following: Motions will all be seconded prior to consideration for discussion by the Board and motions to close or limit debate will be acceptable.

   The chair will decide all questions relative to points of order, subject to an appeal to the Board.

END OF POLICY

Legal Reference(s):

- ORS 192.650
- ORS 244.120(2)
- ORS 332.045
- ORS 332.055
- ORS 332.057
- ORS 332.107


6/01/10 | JW
Board Meeting Agenda

The Board chair, with the assistance of the superintendent will prepare an agenda for all regular meetings of the Board. Items of business may be suggested by any Board member, staff member, student or citizen of the district by notifying the superintendent at least [five] working days prior to the meeting.

[A consent agenda may be used by the Board for noncontroversial business. The consent agenda will consist of routine business that requires action but not necessarily discussion. These items may all be approved at the same time. A Board member may ask that any item be removed from the consent agenda. The removed item will then be placed on the regular agenda.]

The agenda will follow a general order established by the Board. Opportunities for the audience to be heard will be included. The Board will follow the order of business set up by the agenda unless the order is altered by a consensus of the Board.

Items of business not on the agenda may be discussed and acted upon if the majority of the Board agrees to consider them.

The agenda, together with supporting materials, will be distributed by the district office or superintendent to Board members at least [three] full working days prior to the meeting. The agenda will be available to the press and to interested patrons through the superintendent’s office at the same time it is available to the Board members. Copies of the agenda for the press and public will not contain any confidential information included in the Board members’ packets.

A copy of the agenda will be posted in each district facility on the day of the meeting. [Members of the public may request a copy of the agenda at the superintendent’s office.]

The district will ensure equally effective communications are provided to qualified persons with disabilities upon request as required by the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Appropriate auxiliary aids and services may include large print, Braille, audio recordings and readers. Primary consideration will be given to the requests of the person with a disability in the selection of appropriate auxiliary aids and services.

Should the Board demonstrate such requests would result in a fundamental alteration in the service, program or activity or in undue financial and administrative burdens, alternate, equally effective communications will be used.
Auxiliary aids and services for persons with disabilities will be available at no charge to the individual.

END OF POLICY

Legal Reference(s):

ORS 192.640

Conduct of Board Meetings

The rules of parliamentary procedure contained in *Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised*, “Procedure in Small Boards” as modified by the Board will govern the Board in its deliberations. Discussion by Board members will be unlimited as long as it applies to the motion before the Board or the matter under consideration. The Board may vote to limit discussion and the chair will confine discussion to the matter before the Board. The chair may limit the time of any citizen appearing before the Board so that all who wish to be heard may have the opportunity.

Individual votes on motions and/or resolutions will be by “yes” or “no,” and the result of each member’s vote will be recorded by name. A Board member who abstains from voting will be so recorded.

END OF POLICY

Legal Reference(s):

ORS 165.535
ORS 165.540
ORS 192.650
Public Participation in Board Meetings

All Board meetings, with the exception of executive sessions, will be open to the public. The Board invites district citizens to attend Board meetings to become acquainted with the program and operation of the district. Members of the public also are encouraged to share their ideas and opinions with the Board when appropriate.

It is the intent of the Board to ensure communications with individuals with disabilities are as effective as communications with others. Individuals with hearing, vision or speech impairments will be given an equal opportunity to participate in Board meetings. Primary consideration will be given to requests of qualified individuals with disabilities in selecting appropriate auxiliary aids and services.

Auxiliary aids and services for persons with disabilities will be available at no charge to the individual.

All auxiliary aids and/or service requests must be made with appropriate advance notice. Should the Board demonstrate such requests would result in a fundamental alteration in the service, program or activity or in undue financial and administrative burdens, alternative, equally effective means of communication will be used.

Audience

During an open session of a Board meeting, members of the public are specifically invited to present concerns during the designated portion of the agenda. At the discretion of the chair, further public participation may be allowed.

Request for an Item on the Agenda

A member of the public may request the superintendent place an item of concern on the agenda of a regular Board meeting. This request should be made in writing and presented to the [superintendent] [Board chair] for consideration at least [five working days] prior to the scheduled meeting.

Procedures for Public Participation in Meetings

The Board will establish procedures for public participation in open meetings. The purpose of these procedures will be to inform the public how to effectively participate in Board meetings for the best interests of the individual, the district and the patrons. The information will be easily accessible and available to all patrons attending a public Board meeting.

Discussion or presentation concerning a published agenda item is limited to its designated place on the agenda, unless otherwise authorized by the chair.

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1Auxiliary aids include, but are not limited to, such services and devices as qualified interpreters, assistive listening systems, note takers, readers, taped texts, Brailled materials and large print.
A visitor speaking during the meeting may introduce a topic not on the published agenda. The Board, at its discretion, may require that a proposal, inquiry or request be submitted in writing, and reserves the right to refer the matter to the administration for action or study.

Any person who is invited by the chair to speak to the Board during a meeting should state his/her name and address and, if speaking for an organization, the name and identity of the organization. A spokesperson should be designated to represent a group with a common purpose.

Statements by members of the public should be brief and concise. The chair may use discretion to establish a time limit on discussion or oral presentation by visitors.

Questions asked by the public, when possible, will be answered immediately by the chair or referred to staff members for reply. Questions requiring investigation may, at the discretion of the chair, be referred to the superintendent for response at a later time.

At the discretion of the Board chair, anyone wishing to speak before the Board, either as an individual or as a member of a group, on any agenda item or other topic, may do so by providing the Board secretary with a completed registration card prior to the Board meeting in order to allow the chair to provide adequate time for each agenda item.

The Board chair should be alert to see that all visitors have been acknowledged and thanked for their presence and especially for any contributed comments on agenda issues. Similar courtesy should be extended to members of staff who have been in attendance. Their return for future meetings should be welcomed.

Petitions

Petitions may be accepted at any Board meeting. No action will be taken in response to a petition before the next regular meeting. Petitions will be referred to the superintendent for consideration and recommendation.

Criticisms of Staff Members

Speakers may offer objective criticism of district operations and programs, but the Board will not hear complaints concerning individual district personnel. The chair will direct the visitor to the appropriate means for Board consideration and disposition of legitimate complaints involving individuals.

END OF POLICY

Legal Reference(s):
ORS 165.535
ORS 165.540
ORS 192.610 - 192.690
ORS 332.057
ORS 165.535
ORS 165.540
ORS 192.610 - 192.690
ORS 332.057


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PROCEDURES IN SMALL BOARDS

EXCERPT FROM ROBERT’S RULES OF ORDER

“In a board meeting where there are not more than about a dozen members present, some of
the formality that is necessary in a large assembly would hinder business. The rules governing
such meetings are different from the rules that hold in other assemblies, in the following respects:

♦ Members are not required to obtain the floor before making motions or speaking, which
they can do while seated.

♦ There is no limit to the number of times a member can speak to a question, and motions to
close or limit debate generally should not be permitted.

♦ Informal discussion of a subject is permitted while a motion is pending.

♦ The chairman need not rise while putting question to vote.

♦ The chairman can speak in discussion without rising or leaving the chair; and, subject to
rule or custom within the particular board (which should be uniformly followed regardless
of how many members are present), he usually can make motions and usually votes on all
questions.

♦ Sometimes, when a proposal is perfectly clear to all present, a vote can be taken without a
motion’s having been introduced. Unless agreed to by unanimous consent, all proposed
actions of a board must be approved by vote under the same rules as in other assemblies,
except that a vote can be taken initially by a show of hands, which is often a better method
in such meetings.

To Limit Debate
When members of the assembly call out informally, “Question! Question!”, it means only
that they as individuals are ready to vote on the pending question or motion. This informal
“call for the question” by members must be clearly differentiated from the formal motion
“to close debate and vote immediately on the pending question”, (or what is exactly the
same) the formal “I move the previous question”.

To Close Debate
“I move the previous Question” is the old, brief way of moving to close debate.
The current formal way of closing debate is “I move that we close debate and vote
immediately on the pending question”. Requires a second.
Is not debatable nor can it have a subsidiary motion to amend.
Requires a two-thirds vote to pass.

NOTE: Copies of Roberts Rules of Order are available at most book stores. It is recommended
the Chairman have a copy of “Parliamentary Procedure at a glance”.

Page 19
Leader of the Board

President of the school board—it’s an impressive title, and it should be, since only a handful of people are elected to serve on a school board, and fewer still become president.

Election to the office assumes the new president somehow automatically gains the leadership skills necessary to meet the responsibilities of the position. But few board presidents are prepared for the demands they will face.

After working with more than 30 board presidents in six different districts, we have observed three distinct situations in which the president’s leadership skills are most often tested: conducting board meetings, handling board relationships, and representing the district. If the board president can demonstrate solid leadership skills in these three situations, the district and the community stand to benefit.

The following suggestions for board presidents are based on our combined experience as superintendents—and the experience of the board presidents we currently work with, both of whom understand the sometimes unexpected leadership challenges of the position.

1. Conducting board meetings

Without skillful leadership, board meetings can fall into long, protracted marathons that undermine the board’s effectiveness. These practical strategies can help you make meetings more productive:

- **Planning the meeting.** Several days beforehand, meet with the superintendent to review the planned agenda, discussing each agenda item and anticipating reactions to the items and the need for specific background materials. Sensitive issues can be examined and, if needed, strategies devised to deal with particularly difficult items. Working together, you can identify contentious items and fine-tune the order of the agenda.

  An important goal of this meeting is to ensure that board members have good information, appropriate to the topic, on which to base decisions. This preliminary discussion can save many headaches and almost always improves the efficiency of the meeting.

- **Starting on time.** Although it seems simple enough, starting on time can take real determination. Delaying the start of the meeting because a board member, reporter, or staff member is late sets an unfavorable tone, suggesting preferential treatment for some and penaliz-
ing those who are present. Starting on time sets the right tone.

Allocating time. The board should set a reasonable length for meetings. Two hours or less should be sufficient—patience and good judgment may be impaired after that. Less-formal work sessions can be used for in-depth study of issues and lengthy pondering.

You should expect board members to be prepared to engage in informed discussions—most of which will lead to a decision on a given issue. Long pauses in discussion during the meeting might mean thoughtful reflection, but they might also indicate that board members have not read the background material. Be ready to intervene if necessary, perhaps prompting your colleagues to find the needed resources for discussion.

Calling for motions. By calling for a motion at opportune times, you can significantly influence the pace and direction of the meeting, putting a pointed discussion to rest and making time for other important items. Calling for a motion requires a fundamental understanding of parliamentary procedure, however, so you’ll need to be familiar with key procedural actions.

Managing the discussion. The rule of thumb is to involve everyone and stay on the agenda. Some board members relish the opportunity to share their viewpoints on topics, while others may be reluctant to speak out. A good president will notice, often by reading nonverbal clues, the need to broaden participation. Simply asking for opinions or comments from each board member can bring everyone into the dialogue. Certainly, ownership in decisions is improved when more than two or three board members are involved in their formulation.

You should be prepared to remind colleagues to keep their comments and discussion to items on the agenda, however. If comments stray too far and diplomacy does not bring results, a more forceful “out of order” directive might be needed. Another tactic is to defer discussion on unrelated issues to subsequent meetings.

You should also listen actively to the discussion. Good board members keep an open mind and are willing to change positions when new information demands it. But you might be called on to break a tie vote, so careful attention to discussion is especially important.

A successful president is a facilitator of relationships.

Using the gavel judiciously. The gavel represents a shout for attention. Some board presidents steadfastly avoid using it for that very reason, but for others, the sound of the gavel can be habit forming. Although its use should be tempered, the gavel is of great value. It is a powerful tool and, when used sparingly, can garner respect for you.

Reaching closure. Reports by staff and community members are a valuable means of communication to the board, but when a report is too long, you should step in, thank the presenter, pause the process, and ask other board members if they have questions. If there are none, you can then move to the next item on the agenda. If time given to reports is not carefully managed, discussion on other important items on the agenda will suffer.

Reining in board members who enjoy the limelight can be more difficult than controlling presenters, but it is no less important. A board meeting is a tempting platform for posturing and soapbox speech making, so use the same strategies with colleagues that you use with other speakers.

2. Handling board relationships

A successful president is a facilitator of relationships, recognizing and capitalizing on the strengths of other board members, harmonizing divergent views, and diffusing heated exchanges. In this regard, you have three important responsibilities:

Making committee appointments. The authority to appoint committees is one of the board president’s most important leadership tools. Appointing specific members to serve on a committee rather than asking for volunteers shows a proactive leadership style.

It can be awkward when a board member volunteers for a committee that is not a good fit for the member’s skills. Suggesting more appropriate areas of service is a good way to defuse this situation. Committee appointments are also a means of promoting board member development, particularly for a future leadership role. This is especially important if the board uses a rotation system to elect presidents.

Handling acrimony among members. The president also has the challenging role of peacemaker. Important responsibilities and divergent views can lead to strong emotions and even conflict. You must be able to mediate between leading board members. If conflict is permitted to continue unabated, the tone will spread and contaminate other board relationships. There is no magic in this—such acrimony must be stopped quickly. Problems will not go away and should not be left for someone else to resolve.

Carrying out censure and reprimands. Perhaps one of the most onerous responsibilities of the president is policing people. Unethical, unprofessional, and illegal behavior must not be ignored. The code of ethics provided by the state school boards association can serve as a model of expectations. When a situation develops that suggests censure or reprimand, you should frame the issue in appropriate language and bring it before the full board for review and action.

Even though most agenda items are established by the superintendent, this one is not. It is up to you to tackle these issues. Addressing problems in a private meeting with a given board member can sometimes be productive and avoid the embarrassment of public censure. You must make a judgment on the most productive way of maintaining board effectiveness while protecting relationships.
3. Representing the district

The board president also plays an important role outside board meetings. In most settings the president’s comments, personal views, and position on issues are clearly influential. Here are five valuable areas of leadership:

- **Speaking for the board or district.** From testifying at legislative hearings to speaking at press conferences, you will be called on to formally state board positions on issues. Preparation for these situations should always include consultation with the full board and superintendent.

- **Representing the board and district at community events.** The public looks to you to represent the district during a variety of ceremonial events, such as receptions, meetings of service clubs, and special community programs. If you are not already reasonably comfortable with public speaking, now is the time to work on this skill.

- **Referring issues to the administration.** The board president should enforce the established line of authority. If the board is to conduct its role as a policy-making body, members need to leave the daily operation of the district to paid staff. Board members who are reluctant to refer issues to the staff encourage and reinforce behavior that leads to micro-management. You set the tone for other board members and may need to remind them of the limits of their authority.

- **Recruiting board candidates.** Recruiting potential board candidates may, or may not, be an accepted practice in a given community. If supported by the full board, you may contact and encourage well-qualified citizens to file for election when a vacancy is available. Encouraging potential candidates may improve the number of well-qualified candidates on the ballot.

- **Participating in board candidate workshops.** All boards have a culture of their own, a set of expectations, accepted behaviors, and patterns of interaction. You are the best person to convey these to the candidates. The central office staff can provide a useful information framework by sharing district goals, data, and challenges. However, you should be the one who shares the unwritten, and often unstated, expectations that have evolved over years. This insight can help get new members off to a better start.

**Leadership development**

Considering the importance of the position, surprisingly few opportunities—formal or informal—exist to prepare for the leadership challenges of the office of board president. Usually board policy describing the duties of board officers provides only a brief overview of the job. While the superintendent is clearly in a position to assist and support the president, other resources are also available.

In our state, for example, the Missouri School Boards Association offers leadership training and preparation in many aspects of board service. Most state school boards associations offer similar opportunities. Additionally, state association meetings, regional and national conferences, and professional publications encourage the exchange of ideas and provide opportunities for board presidents to learn from the experiences of others.

The role of board president is an influential and powerful one. Meeting the responsibilities of the office requires leadership skills and the willingness to use them. When the president possesses these skills, board meetings are efficient, goals are achieved, and district influence is extended. Although the office can be challenging, it may well be the most professionally and personally rewarding part of your board service.

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Why do some citizens seek election to their school boards? As state association trainers, we’ve heard hundreds of board members tell us candidly and thoughtfully their reasons for why they run. They want to give back to their communities, to help preserve good schools, to support public education, and to participate in this local expression of American democracy.

Author and businessman Robert Greenleaf believed that the desire to serve is innate in most people. Servant leadership is a phrase he coined in 1970. This concept provides a powerful and profound way to talk about the governance role of school boards and the limited but key role of its members. Greenleaf’s seminal ideas have spawned a whole community of thought and substantial literature, including Stephen Covey’s *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People,* and John Carver’s *Boards That Make A Difference.*

School board members are almost always servant leaders in a literal sense: In the vast majority of states, school board members do not get compensated. Some form of service motivates members to give 10 to 20 hours a month, without compensation, for board meetings and other district and community involvement.

While we all know that there are many rewards for service—for example, the perception of power or the opportunity to advocate for a particular interest—mature and thoughtful board members always have offered leadership that is not about individuals, but about the common good—the community, its children, and its future.

**What makes a servant leader?**

Of course, being an unpaid board member doesn’t automatically make you a servant leader. Larry Speers, the former executive of the Greenleaf Center, came up with a list of qualities of servant leaders. For school board members, the most significant characteristics are:

**Listening.** It is the foundation of servant leadership and of effective board service. School board members, in our view, sit between the community and the district, facilitating communication between the two. The board tells the community’s story to the district and the district’s story to the community. Many experienced board members have learned that too much speaking and not enough listening will not get the job done. Deep, careful listening ensures all voices are heard and encourages true dialogue about critical issues.

**Healing.** Schools have a remarkable record of connecting to some of society’s toughest problems—race, poverty, immigration, and changes in the American family. Many people have been hurt by schools. It is not surprising that there is a need for healing. Board members who are focused on healing are in a position to restore health to the organization and to begin helping people. Health requires districts that truly serve students, staff, and community and confront some of the tough issues that have created collateral damage.

**Persuasion.** School boards have tremendous power, but successful boards exercise their power as persuasion rather...
than coercion. Effective boards work to draw staff, students, and community into the vision and collective values of the district. The board sets direction for the district—by pointing the way and by modeling what it wants. In the end, the board will get what it models before it gets what it talks about.

Foresight. A key role of the board is to focus on the future. The board uses the horizon to keep the district on course and refuses to allow day-to-day concerns to pull its attention away from the horizon. Together, board members come to a profound and deep understanding of who they are and where they want to go. It is often hard to see the future implications of today’s decisions and trends—but the board’s exercise of servant leadership is the best viewpoint available.

Commitment to people. Schools, like most institutions, are about the people who staff them. Teachers who know instruction and are focused on learning; principals who care about a well-articulated curriculum, student achievement, and staff development; administrators who care about the district culture and serving the students and community; support staff who understand how important their roles are—all are key to a high-performing district. Servant-leadership boards are like orchestra conductors who know they don’t make the music. They are focused on strengthening the capacity of the people in the institution—the capacity to learn, to teach, to contribute.

Community building. The African proverb has it right: “It takes a village.” So, whether you start from the student side and work to draw in community resources, or from the community side where you quickly realize the centrality of good schools, the more connected and strong the community and schools, the better. In addition to caring about the community in which the district resides, servant-leadership boards also care about another community—the district community of students, staff, and parents. They work within the district to build a foundation of good communications, good relationships, and clarity about roles. The vitality of both the external community and internal district community are equally important.

How might individual board members think about their “personal agenda”? How do individual board members understand their contribution to the work of the board? We believe school board members make the most profound contribution when they become servant leaders.

Balcony versus dance floor

If a school board is going to provide effective leadership for the staff and district, there is no more important ingredient than trust. The board must trust the superintendent; the superintendent must consider the board trustworthy; the families, students, and staff must be free to pursue their educational pursuits within a safe and nurturing environment.

How is trust established?

Greenleaf was clear that boards should consciously and intentionally “stay back from operations.” He understood the board’s role to be the “management (or macro management) of the organization.” The board sets a course and steers in the right direction. But the day-to-day operations are left in the hands of the superintendent and his or her staff.

Breaking this trust by choosing to involve itself in operations destroys the heart of the board governance structure, and thus the trustworthiness of the school district. It is the board’s responsibility to define and live within its role. The board cannot look outside itself to define how to establish an effective governance role. It must define or reconfirm its role each time a new member is seated on the board.

Trust allows the board to focus on direction for the organization. Setting direction begins with the board holding, as stewards for the community, the institution’s identity. Who are we? What do we care about? What are we trying to do? Authors Dick Broholm and Doug Wysocky-Johnson suggest that the balcony, instead of the dance floor, is the metaphoric space that allows the board to do its identity and reflective work. Collectively, the board disciplines itself to stay on the balcony, where it can see the big picture, and off the dance floor, where members easily can lose sight of the district’s direction and purpose.

How does a board that is committed to staying in the balcony keep in touch with what’s really going on in the schools? How does the board’s trust in the superintendent avoid being a blind trust? The board requires data for its own governance needs, data that is likely different from that used by the administration for operations. Further, if the board is intentional about its own information requirements, it likely will have a more trustworthy and accountable role in assuring organizational integrity—a key ingredient in today’s sensitive governance environment.

Service is a powerful metaphor for thinking about school boards. The practice of servant leadership, the joining of two seemingly dissimilar impulses, allows school board members to make a valuable contribution.

Public education is struggling to fulfill its rightful role in our increasingly complex and interconnected global village. Today, too many people only ask, “What’s in it for me?” In this regard, we are in danger of losing the healthy democracy that has allowed “the American experiment” to go forward for 230 years.

School boards are a visible expression of American citizens who are willing to step up in service to their community and future generations. The role of the board and the work of board members are captured in the notion of service. As school boards take responsibility for helping our public schools plot a course forward, they demonstrate the importance and power of servant leadership. Let’s appreciatively follow their example.

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