Building a Strong Board of Trustees

California Association of Independent Schools
Trustee - Heads Conference
January 23, 2010
Good schools have a sense of mission that kids and adults can all articulate. They have an identity...a quality that’s all their own, that feels quite sturdy. Good schools are also disciplined...a place where people set goals and...hold each other accountable.

~Sara Lawrence Lightfoot

Think about your school’s mission statement. What words or phrases are you most passionate about. Sheds light on your personal commitment. Do you know what fellow trustees care about most? The Mission Statement is your road map. Everything you do should move the train down the track.
“If you don’t know where you’re going.... any road will take you there.”

~ the Cheshire Cat
Here’s the thing...

WHEN THINGS ARE GOING WELL...

Any system will do!

Conventional wisdom matters. Good systems can save the day when people drop the ball. Good systems encourage collaboration and full participation. Good systems require transparency. Good systems support good practice.
Sometimes, even with a compass and a map...things can go wrong. We can get lost! See if you can write the story these pictures tell...
WHAT’S THE STORY?

How do exceptional boards prepare for the worst as they work for the best?
“Function in disaster, finish in style!”
~ motto of The Madeira School
The Board and the Head are partners...together, they lead.

To move forward, the Board and Head must work together. Relationship grounded in trust.
Design of the Partnership

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NAIS Trustee Handbook

Sunday, January 24, 2010
Balance does not mean equal!

Each has something the other needs. Board = authority. Head = expertise.
Boards & Heads are not created equal!
Board holds authority

+ Head has expertise

= BALANCE
Individual trustees do not carry authority!
BLENDING IN...

REQUIRES

SELF-AWARENESS!

And a sense of the “whole.” Otherwise, you cannot find your own “place.” What do I bring to the table? How can I most effectively contribute to the “good judgment” of the board and the Head?
No, that’s not quite it...
All of the board’s authority is corporate. Parents, teachers, students--may not see it that way. Parking lot conversations. Even though you do not individually carry the board’s authority, you can give the impression that you do. Everything you say may be taken as the board’s position.
Every trustee means well and believes he or she is doing good work in serving the school. You do what you do because you care and because you believe in what the school is about. You see yourself as one of the “good guys”--maybe even a “Super Hero.”
But sometimes, trustees can “over achieve!” It is easy to second-guess the head or other administrators and to do harm by doing too much good! Or to “OVER contribute” to discussions with more passion for your own view or position than for the “good of the team.” To get ahead of the group.
HOW OTHERS MAY SEE YOU...
SCARY! How can this cause problems? Examples? Alternative? Yes, you may look like a 200 pound gorilla when you carry the added weight of the board into a conversation. Is this a guy you want to say “no” to?
KEY WORDS SO FAR...

• MISSION

• PARTNERSHIP

• ENSEMBLE
the effective board
Let’s look at the division of responsibility between Board and Head. They share authority, but ALL authority flows from the Board. The Head is a DEPUTY of the Board. The Head oversees daily operations, is expert in education, manager of personnel, ensures that the mission is being fulfilled. Board does not intervene directly in operational decisions or actions. Board has a fiduciary duty to see that the Head is functioning in alignment with their policies, goals and within the school’s resources. The Board evaluates the Head every year. The Board must be informed enough to make good decisions. There are two sets of Board functions...
The board operates with two sets of functions. Calendar should be set annually. The critical functions are those that affect the operation of the school. Annual assessment of the board and individual trustees. Open discussion of processes used to reach decisions. Review of strategic priorities and progress toward goals. Work plans to ensure movement toward strategic objectives. Without structures, rules and guidelines, internal communication and trust will break down. The Board must not only govern and oversee the school, it must also evaluate and improve its own performance.
The Head of School...

• **Collaborates** with Board to set priorities
• **Oversees** operations and personnel
• **Implements** Board policies
• **Informs** the Board about all issues

The Board is the school head’s employer, but not her supervisor. The Board and Head co-create her goals as they support the strategic direction of the school. The Board evaluates progress toward goals through a co-created process. The Board does not look over the Head’s shoulder on a daily basis. As a reciprocal of the autonomy he is given, the Head has an obligation to VOLUNTARILY provide the Board with the information it needs to make informed decisions. (Even if they don’t ask!)
Design of the Partnership

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Revisit division of responsibility.
What makes the partnership work?

What are the key elements of successful partnerships?
Three Key Activities to build partnership:

- Build trust
- Co-create relationships
- Have the right conversations

These key activities apply equally to the Board and Head. Everything depends on their mutual commitment to these functions. TRUST – RELATIONSHIPS – RIGHT CONVERSATIONS: THESE ARE THE PILLARS OF THE BOARD–HEAD RELATIONSHIP.
The number one reason for leadership failure is a lack of self-awareness. Board and Head must feel mutually accountable TO ONE ANOTHER. The uniting commitment is the priority to the school and sustaining the institution.
CASE STUDY
IN
PARTNERSHIP
Case Study

In his third year, the head reports to the board that he believes the teaching methods and materials in the primary grades are outdated and not sufficiently challenging. The board agrees to his plan to work with the teachers to introduce new approaches. The teachers take this as criticism and resist the new plans. Several go to individual trustees to complain. The trustees admit their support but blame the head for not presenting the potential problems. The faculty and the parents quickly see a rift between the head and the board. Parents begin taking sides and demanding to know where the board stands. The faculty are increasingly demoralized.
Questions:

WHERE DO THINGS GO WRONG?
How does the board respond?
To parents?
To faculty?
To the head?

This reminds us of the SUV slowly sinking in the lake. It is the Law of Unintended Consequences.
These three elements are the pillars of a great board. TRUST is the indispensable ingredient. Transparency means that all processes, decisions and discussions are known and knowable to all. Finally, the horizon for the board is long. Getting there requires stamina. The board’s task is a marathon, not a sprint. The board has to be in the “deep end” of everything and be there for the long haul. This is what it means to set strategic objectives.
TRUST IS THE MOST INDISPENSABLE INGREDIENT. Without it, everything will be harder, the climb will be steeper, and the board will not function at its highest potential. Without trust, the board – head relationship will be dysfunctional. Trust but verify.
Notice that trust is active. “Create” is an active verb that denotes a generative act. It means bringing something into being that did not exist before. It requires vision. It requires commitment. It requires faith. It requires performance. Sustaining trust means paying close attention to critical communication. When misunderstandings arise, they must be addressed and cleared up. Trust requires vigilance and constant “checking out” to keep channels of communication clean and clear.
“Take communication. In a high-trust relationship, you can say the wrong thing, and people will still get your meaning. In a low-trust relationship, you can be very measured and precise, and they’ll still misinterpret you.”

~Stephen Covey, Jr.
The Benefits of trust...

- Speed up the learning curve
- Bring your full self into the relationship
- Create powerful conversations and possibilities

TRUST makes everything else possible. Trust speeds up the learning curve. Allows authentic engagement. Enables powerful conversations and possibilities. All of these are necessary to good leadership and sound governance. None of this is possible without trust.
The Second Building Block: Transparency

TRUST + TRANSPARENCY = Authentic Communication

Transparency means: NO SECRETS. The deliberations leading to certain decisions might need to be confidential. The decisions and the determining reasons must be clear to everyone. Non-profit boards must make their deliberations open and clear to everyone in the community. That breeds a broad base of trust on the part of the community. What they can understand, they can accept and endorse. What is opaque and unclear can be seen as a threat.
“The best way for leaders to start information flowing freely in their organizations is to set a good example. They must accept, even welcome, unsettling information.”

From *Transparency: How Leaders Create a Culture of Candor* (Bennis, Goleman, et al)

If people act in good faith, they have nothing to hide. There is no such thing as communicating too much, too soon to too many people. For the Board: this is both internal and external. Board process must be transparent.
The board needs to give reasons to the community for its decisions. The head needs to explain himself clearly to the community. Within the board, all voices need to be heard. Annual board assessment is important.
The Johari Matrix reveals a great deal about the impact of self-awareness and a willingness to be open to others. Unknown to self and unknown to others equals a blind spot that can be damaging to individuals and to groups (the board.) In the absence of good information, people will fill in the blanks with their own stories.
CASE STUDY
IN TRANSPARENCY & TRUST
Case Study

At board meeting, Chair of Finance Committee reports an unplanned $75,000 shortfall in the budget. Committee Chair reports it is “not a problem” because the committee is on top of the situation. No one at the meeting raises questions or objections. You are new and mention that you have no financial information for background. When you ask whether the deficit is caused by decreased income or increased expense, you are told “the committee is on top of it.”
Key Questions

What is the problem?
What should the chair do?
What should the head do?
As a new trustee, what should you do?
The board must take the long view. Changing or improving an organization is long-term work. Any significant culture change is a ten-year project. The multiple constituencies of a school make any cultural change a challenge. The metaphor of “free range chickens” is an apt image—keeping everyone on the same path, heading in the same direction is one of the most challenging jobs there is.
“Raising free-range chickens is the easy part. The hard part is the drive to Abilene.”
From responsible to exceptional...

Exceptional Boards...

- MEASURE IMPACT
- EVALUATE
- DEBATE ISSUES
- OPEN DOORS
- MAKE CONNECTIONS

Each of these is essential to a high-functioning board. These are tasks that must be dutifully performed each year, every day, and with the priority goal of gaining the community’s confidence in the board. Why SHOULD they trust you? If they don’t know you? Don’t hear from you? Don’t know your reasons?
“A great board is not a gift; it’s a victory!”

~ Dick Chait

I love this. Dick Chait is right. Great boards must be created and sustained with hard work and great risks. Gaining and keeping trust is hard work. If you don’t trust yourselves, no one else will trust you.
The future is in your hands... maintaining the strategic perspective

Looking at the future. The world the students will enter and inherit. What skills will they need? How do we educate for a world we cannot fully imagine? This is the challenge.
A wise man once said....

“The future ain’t what it used to be.”

~Yogi Berra

ANOTHER wise man had a different take on the future...
A “long boom” economically is possible and perhaps probable for the United States.

The “end of retirement” will be upon us in a generation or two.

~quoted in a presentation by Pat Bassett in 2005...
Need both perspectives. The landscape is always changing. Looking back is important if you want to know where you are going. You have to know both to really know where you are. Tools: mission and map! Head and Board working together to lead the community. Trust – Transparency – Stamina!
It is a cycle that never rests. Each new accomplishment and change creates emerging possibilities. It is important to see the cyclical process of vision, planning and action as organic and ongoing, not a task to be completed and checked off.
Strategic Planning

Setting Priorities...

How do we decide what matters most?

How do we determine urgency and timing? How will resources be found and allocated to meet the goals?
FIVE MOST IMPORTANT QUESTIONS YOU WILL ASK ABOUT YOUR ORGANIZATION

• WHAT IS OUR MISSION?
• WHO IS OUR CUSTOMER?
• WHAT DOES OUR CUSTOMER VALUE?
• WHAT ARE OUR RESULTS?
• WHAT IS OUR PLAN?

~Peter Drucker
KEY WORDS...

- MISSION
- PARTNERSHIP
- ENSEMBLE
- TRUST
- TRANSPARENCY
- STAMINA
- STRATEGY
THOUGHTS FOR DAY’S END... TRUST – TRANSPARENCY – STAMINA. You have the tools: the compass of your mission and the map of your strategic plan. You are ready to begin the journey.
As we slowly ride into the sunset...

let’s remember...

...it’s a long drive with those chickens!
That’s it!

Thanks for a great session!

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