

BOARDSMANSHIP

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Effective governance will help us operate the quality schools that our students deserve, our parents demand, and our church's future requires.

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BY ED BOYATT

Tom was one of our best board chairmen. A logger by trade, he was an educator at heart. There was no one more committed to the well-being of children and to quality Adventist education than he. One evening, after a heated school board discussion, he asked me wistfully: "Can you give our board some ideas about how to operate more effectively?"

Tom understood what professional educators have known for decades—a professional approach to board governance is one of our greatest needs. The goal of this article is to share with Tom and other board members "the generally accepted governance practices that effective boards have in common."¹

Why Is Boardsmanship Important?

Let's first review why quality boards are so important to Adventist education, and why boardsmanship training is essential:

1. *Effective leadership by the board and principal inspires the school staff to give their best.* When leaders create a climate of trust and confidence, the staff feel supported and positive about their work. And when teachers feel good about their work, students benefit.

2. *Quality boards elicit support from the constituency.* When the school board and staff act with integrity and show respect for each other, the constituency will have confidence in the governance process. When confidence is high, community support for the school will be strong.

3. *Effective boards ensure accountability.* True accountability is possible only where authority is clearly defined. When the board's roles and the staff's roles are clearly defined and understood, this usually results in positive and professional attitudes and behavior.

4. *Quality boardsmanship is vital because our school system is essential to the church.* Effective governance will help us operate the quality schools that our students deserve, our parents demand, and our church's future requires.

Roles and Responsibilities

Boardsmanship is a term for the processes that effective boards use to govern a school or conference. While school board responsibilities may vary, there are at least four roles that are generally accepted as essential for effective boardsmanship:

1. First, the role of the board is to *establish a vision*. Of all the duties of boards, none is more central to the purpose of governance than ensuring that a long-term vision is established at every school. This task begins with a clear mission statement and a strategic plan for the school. This vision and plan reflect the consensus of the constituency, conference, board, and staff as to what students need in order to achieve current and eternal success. The vision sets the school's direction, and should drive every aspect of its program.

2. Next, the board is responsible for *establishing and maintaining an organizational structure that supports the vision*. The board establishes this structure by:

- developing policies,
- establishing budget priorities for both operating and capital improvement, and
- supporting and showing their appreciation of the professional staff.

3. Another major responsibility of the board is to *assess progress and ensure accountability* to the constituency. The school administration and the board evaluate the school's overall progress toward its vision. They assess student achievement and development. Along with the superintendent, they

monitor the completion of annual employee evaluations. This assessment process also includes participation in preparing the school accreditation report.

4. Finally, board members are *advocates for students and Adventist education*. That is why it is inconsistent for board members to enroll their children in public or other private schools. Loyalties cannot be divided. Board members should take every opportunity to communicate to constituents and community members the value of Adventist education.

These four roles represent the functions that are fundamental for school boards. They are the *what*, the *how*, the *how well*, and the *marketing* of Adventist education. Establishing a vision and mission is the *what*, maintaining an organizational structure to support the vision is the *how*, assessing the progress and ensuring accountability is the *how well*, and the communication of the importance of our youth and Adventist education is the *marketing* role of each board member.

Board Members as Individuals

The effectiveness of a board depends upon the values, skills, and wisdom of each member. Therefore, the personal

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attributes of board members are essential to the board's success.

First, *being a trustee (one who holds the resources and youth of the constituency in trust) involves a certain disposition or attitude, not a personal agenda*. Unfortunately, not everyone who is elected to a board assumes the disposition of a trustee. Some members never make the transition from being an individual with narrow interests or agendas to being part of a governance team. Only when board members see themselves as stewards of the constituency's youth and resources will the board be highly effective.

Second, *trustees understand that their personal success as a board member depends on the effectiveness of the board as a group*. They understand that a board member's authority is vested in the board as a whole. Boards govern; individuals do not.

Third, *a trustee knows that how a board member governs is as important*

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Of all the duties of boards, none is more central to the purpose of governance than ensuring that a long-term vision is established at every school.

as what he or she contributes. A trustee builds trust with other members and with the school staff by treating them as he or she wishes to be treated. That is why trustees always keep sensitive information confidential.

Next, *trustees are aware of and respect the diversity of perspectives and styles on the board and in the con-*

stituency. They learn to work with and value these differences as they build strong consensus in their deliberations.

Finally, *trustees see themselves as learners.* They want to become familiar with the policies and guidelines of Adventist education, as well as the components of excellence in teaching and leadership.

Board Members Are Part of a Team

Board members must learn that power does not reside in individuals. Power is exercised only through the authority of the entire board. Thus, every member must enter board service with the idea of building consensus among fellow board members. For the board to demonstrate genuine leadership, each member must learn how to work effectively as the member of the team.

*Maximizing School Board Leadership*² identifies certain qualities that facilitate teamwork on the board. Effective team members:

- have a positive, supportive attitude;
- are receptive and respectful listeners;
- possess integrity and thus are worthy of trust;
- are able to communicate well with others and do so openly, honestly, and clearly;

- display a high level of professionalism; and
- operate with fairness.

The Glue for the Team

Trust is the most important quality for leaders and their boards. It is the “glue” that facilitates effectiveness. And this trust is earned action by action, meeting by meeting, and year by year.

A high-trust environment exists:

- when members exhibit high standards of integrity and personal ethics;
- when policies and board procedures are consistently followed;
- when board members trust one another; and
- when members trust the expertise of the professional staff, principal, and superintendent.

When this kind of confidence exists, board members believe that their colleagues have the best interest of the students and the school in mind when they vote. Also when there is high trust, members believe that the information given them by the principal or subcommittees is accurate.

Trust fosters the best in others. The professional staff must feel empowered to try creative and innovative instructional methods without the fear of being judged a failure or penalized for taking risks. Teachers expect to be held

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accountable, but a high-trust environment enables everyone to work professionally without the “damper of fear.”

When there is a lack of trust in the principal and teachers, this often creates a situation where boards meddle in areas of the school’s operations that are not appropriate board responsibilities. When roles are clear and trust is high, micro-management of the school by the board will seldom occur. Boards set direction and policy; principals and teachers implement those directions.

Stopping the Leaks

School boards should establish strict guidelines that prohibit disclosure of sensitive information to non-board members. Breach of confidentiality usually takes place in connection with a closed or executive session of the board meeting. These sessions can include such topics as a student discipline appeals, personnel action, and potential litigation. In executive session, only board members are allowed to attend, to ensure that no one else hears about this sensitive information.

Confidentiality is important for a number of reasons. First, the privacy rights of employees and students must be respected. Second, nothing undermines trust relationships more rapidly than having confidential information leak to persons outside the boardroom. When such leaks occur, members may not be certain who violated confidentiality. Suspicion and speculations can eventually undermine trust and make it difficult for members to work together.

Finally, when items relating to potential litigation are discussed, it is in everyone’s best interest to not jeopardize the case by spreading potentially damaging information.

In my professional career, I have witnessed far too many breaches of confidentiality. These incidents resulted in reputations being unfairly destroyed, the climate of trust between board members and the constituency being undermined, and the attorney/client privilege breached. These unprofessional acts offer a painful lesson about how difficult it is to maintain personal reputations and corporate trust once a member acts inappropriately.

High Level of Professionalism

Since Adventist education is of vital interest to the Seventh-day Adventist Church, board members must act with this in mind. Both voted actions and personal behavior of board members set a tone for the school that communicates the importance and seriousness of the mission of Adventist education. Board members should treat teachers and administrators as people of high value who have professional expertise and a special ministry to students.

When board members act unprofessionally, this affects the behavior and morale of the staff. How can the board expect appropriate behavior from the employees if they do not practice it themselves? Too often, unprofessional behavior by the board erodes confidence in the school and the conference office of education.

Board members should take every opportunity to communicate to constituents and community members the value of Adventist education.

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Board members should be advocates for Adventist education.

Who Speaks for the Board?

Chairpersons or board members are occasionally asked to speak on behalf of the board or are requested to characterize the “thinking of the board.” New board members need to learn that the correct question is not who speaks for the board, but what speaks for the board. The actions of the board are the voice of the board. They are the policies and vision of a school and provide the framework for all future actions.

Items typically voted by the board

include tuition collection policy, student handbook regulations, rental agreements, or suggested changes in the school constitution. Since developing policy is one of the main roles of the board, and its actions constitute the true and official voice of the school, a summary of all voted policies should be available to new board members when they become trustees.

No Surprises, Please!

Board chairs and principals do not

like surprises during a board meeting. Likewise, board members do not like to be surprised by a fiscal crisis or news that a teacher is using a controversial instructional method that board members learned about only after parents lodged a complaint. Open and timely communication is essential for efficiency and for trust to develop between boards, educators, and parents.

Board members should notify the principal when major questions or concerns are likely to be raised at a board meeting so that he or she can respond. Board members are also critical “reporters” of information to school leadership. When members hear concerns or rumors about the school, this information needs to be communicated to the principal so that the school team can anticipate problems and respond to emerging developments. Board members must serve as eyes and ears for school leadership.

Using appropriate procedures for placing items on the agenda is another safeguard against surprises. Each board should develop a process (which may be described in a bylaw of the constitution) that is clearly understood by the board and constituency. Since the first step in making a change is getting an item on the agenda, each board member must feel that he or she has the right to do so. If an important item comes up during general questions and answers, it is generally accepted procedure to place that issue on the agenda of the next meeting. It is wise to vote only on official agenda items, which allows time for school administrators to provide necessary information to the board before decisions are formalized and entered in the minutes.

Only a “Rubber Stamp”?

Board members have often told me that they feel the board “is just becoming a rubber stamp!” This concern is usually expressed by a member who desires additional rationale for a certain proposed action or wants to be assured that other options were considered in the decision-making process.

It should not seem surprising that there is often only a short discussion before voting on an agenda item. If a rec-

ommendation supports the mission of the school and the proposal was developed according to standard policies and with counsel from the board and its subcommittees, it should be approved by a large majority vote. If the appropriate “homework” was done, many actions will be unanimously approved. This homework should include a clearly stated rationale and a list of additional options that were considered.

Commitment of Time and Energy

One evening, a veteran board mem-

ber reminded me that serving on the school board is just as much a ministry as teaching a Sabbath school class. I agree. When board membership is taken seriously, members must dedicate sizable blocks of time to becoming an effective trustee of the school.

Regular attendance and participation in board meetings are important, but not sufficient for effective boardsmanship. Effective members are also readers and listeners. They familiarize themselves with current issues in education and listen to the concerns of par-

CODE OF ETHICS

A code of ethics is an expression of those personal ideals that should guide an individual's daily activities.*

In all my actions as a school board member, my first commitment is to the well-being of our youth. My primary responsibility is to each child—regardless of race, creed, color, sex, or national origin.

I also have other major commitments to:

- the philosophy, mission, and goals of Seventh-day Adventist education;
- the teachings and standards of the Seventh-day Adventist Church; and
- the constitutions of my nation and state, the union education code, and the established policies of the school board.

Understanding and accepting the foregoing commitments, I shall:

- consider my position as a board member as a trust and not use it for private advantage or personal gain.
- be constantly aware that I have no legal authority except when I am acting as a member of the board. I shall present my concerns and concepts through the process of board debate and, if in the minority on any decision, I shall abide by and support the majority decision. When I am in the majority, I shall respect divergent opinions.
- encourage ideas and opinions from the constituency and endeavor to incorporate their views in the deliberations and decisions of the board.
- devote sufficient time, thought, and study to proposed actions to be able to base my decisions upon all available facts and vote my honest convictions.
- remember that the basic functions of the board are to establish the policies by which the school is to be administered and recommend to the conference office of education the principal and staff who will implement those policies.
- recognize that the deliberations of the board in executive session are not mine to distribute or discuss. They may be released publicly only with board approval.
- avail myself of opportunities to enlarge my potential as a board member through participation in educational conferences and training sessions.

* *This Code of Ethics was adapted by Ed Boyatt from the Pacific Union Conference Education Code and the Riverside (California) Unified School District bylaws of the board.*

ents and students. They visit the school occasionally to assist in school projects and attend its public programs.

Being an effective board member requires a major commitment of family, career, and discretionary time to the church's educational ministry. Board members with tact, intelligence, professionalism, and a sense of team membership can be a credit to the board, the conference, and the constituents.

Keeping Board Members Informed

Many schools find it useful to prepare a three-ring notebook for each board member. The school secretary or administrative assistant should keep these reference notebooks current. Dividers are helpful in referencing the board minutes, financial statements, operating budget, school handbook, school constitution, sub-committee minutes, and the recommendations of the last accreditation committee. A school map may also prove useful in discussions of the physical plant.³

Board Self-Evaluation

In the board's haste to evaluate school employees or educational programs, it often neglects to evaluate its own work. A self-evaluation can be as simple as asking two questions:

1. What are the strengths of this board?
2. What areas of improvement should be addressed?

Some boards ask teachers to complete a similar form so that their perceptions can be included in the evaluation.

A Challenge to Conference and Union Leadership

We can learn much from many public and private agencies about the importance of providing continuing education programs to train new members in the knowledge and skills of boardsmanship and to polish the skills of those who have served for longer periods of time. Most public school board members in California choose to attend workshops sponsored by the California School Board Association. This organization provides eight seminars over a two-year period that cover the duties and responsibilities of boardsmanship.

At the completion of 56 hours of instruction, participants receive a "Master's in Governance" certificate that testifies to their new competencies and knowledge.⁴ We could learn valuable methodologies from these models of excellence for our own board in-services.

Summary

Church leaders appreciate the many hours of service that lay board members provide each school year. But as schools plan ways to provide the best professional growth experiences for our school employees, they need to remember that boards, too, need to grow professionally. This needs to be an ongoing commitment.

If time is devoted to understanding the roles and functions of effective boardsmanship, everyone concerned can work together to provide the very best for our youth. ✍

The coordinator for this issue, Dr. Ed Boyatt is Associate Professor of Education at La Sierra University in Riverside, California. He has served as a secondary teacher, academy principal, college dean of students, and union associate director of education. Before moving to California in

Guidelines for Productive Board Deliberations*

- Listen with respect,
- Listen to more than is being said,
- Share information calmly,
- Express differences kindly,
- Look for common ground,
- Raise a hand or follow a procedure for speaking up,
- Have a time limit for monologues,
- Allow several others to speak before one member speaks again,
- Be open-minded,
- Learn from others, communicate rather than argue, and
- Allow time for all viewpoints to be expressed.*

* Based on Loofbourrow, p. 29.

A trustee builds trust with other members and with the school staff by treating them as he or she wishes to be treated.

1998, he was Superintendent of Education for the Oregon Conference. Dr. Boyatt has served as a member, executive secretary, or chairman of more than 30 different boards. The editorial staff of the JOURNAL expresses appreciation for his enthusiastic support, advice, and hands-on assistance in preparing this issue.

REFERENCES

1. Sherry Loofbourrow, *Boardsmanship: Maximizing School Board Leadership* (West Sacramento, Calif.: California School Board Association, 1996), p. 2.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
3. *Guidelines for School Board Members* (Portland, Oregon: North Pacific Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1990), p. 8.
4. Davis Campbell, "Effective Governance Model," *California Schools* 57:3 (Spring 1999), p. 29.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

If you are a board member, you should seek information first from the principal and superintendent. They can help you obtain a copy of the guide for board members that most union offices of education produce for their region. They also have access to a computer PowerPoint presentation originally produced in the North Pacific Union that is an excellent resource for a board in-service.

The National School Boards Association conducts regional and national conferences on boardsmanship, as well as publishes the *American School Board Journal*. Check it out at <http://www.asbj.com>.

Many states have a school board association. They conduct board member institutes and usually publish a journal or newsletter. The California Web site is a good place to begin: <http://www.csba.org>.