

Is your school board dysfunctional?

Dysfunctional board behaviors have common denominators. These checkpoints can help you avoid them.

"Lack of leadership" is a frequently discussed topic in many school districts. While the conversation can center on administrators and teachers, the topic seems to surface most frequently when people talk about school boards.

The first indicator of a problem is thinking that one's election to the school board qualifies one to lead. The second symptom is *believing* that one's election to the school board qualifies one to lead.

On this planet leadership is *not* the result of electoral success.

Examples of elected school board members who are dysfunctional leaders

- A newly elected school board member files a freedom of information request two weeks after his election (and before attending his first board meeting!) seeking the balance in the school district's Christmas Club account. Because his family squirrels away money in such an account, he assumes that the school district does the same thing.
- A newly elected school board member wants to approve every news release issued by the school district, and wants final editing rights on the school district newsletter.
- A newly elected school board majority votes to assign members of the board to district classrooms for the purpose of evaluating teachers.
- A waiter elected to the school board begins his tenure by telling cooks what to serve in the school lunch program.
- A newly elected school board member spills all the details of an executive session on negotiations to the union.
- A school board member requests a master key so that he can randomly visit classrooms and school offices nights and weekends.

All of these elected officials probably believe that they're doing the right thing. But the reality is that none of them is moving the system forward, let alone contributing to the well being of students. They are -- as business people might say -- "in over their heads."

School boards will have to overcome dysfunctions like this if their school districts are to improve student achievement and capitalize on the opportunities presented by the future.

Fortunately, dysfunctional behaviors like those above have some common denominators. That makes them easier to diagnose and remedy.

For example, there is a relationship between misunderstanding one's role and the tendency to find yourself in over your head. Other commonalities include the absence of school board orientation programs, a lack of district direction, and a planning process that never progresses to implementation.

The "checkpoints" below can signal dysfunction. If your board keeps hitting potholes, try to determine which of the checkpoints might be related to your bumpy ride. And, if your school board is doing okay, use them as reminders that will keep you on course.

School Board Checkpoints

To get in sync with your community and exhibit true leadership, understand that ...

- **It's the board's role to set policy**, but the line between policy and procedure can get fuzzy. That's why school board members need to keep asking, 'What's this got to do with policy?' Superintendents need to ask the same question. And both school board members and superintendents need to agree that it's okay -- in fact, desirable -- to alert one another to activities which are outside one's role.
- **Vision, mission and priorities are the domain of the school board and superintendent** ... but it's foolhardy to develop these things in isolation. Too many school districts have allowed school improvement teams or other groups to develop district direction and purpose. Wrong. School improvement teams exist to improve teaching and learning. Any vision, mission, and priorities they develop should relate to teaching and learning, and should be developed within the context of the school district's vision, mission, and priorities.
- **The school board and superintendent must be concerned with the entire school district** -- "the big picture." They need priorities which range from curriculum to transportation, from maintenance to budgeting, from alternative programming to staff development. When a school improvement team or other special focus group takes over vision, mission, and priorities, the perspective tends to be rather narrow. For example, most school improvement teams don't have priorities related to long-range financial management, facility maintenance, support staff training, community relations, and other topical areas which must be addressed by a school district. School district vision, mission, and priorities are big picture concerns. Before developing them, it's wise to conduct surveys, review community demographics, assess community support, conduct community listening sessions, and use a process to engage staff and community.
- **Being prepared makes everyone on the board look good.** Remember, the perception is the reality. If the first sound after the gavel is board members

opening their informational packets, it's a good bet the meeting will not be one in which your best foot is forward.

Some people have a great deal of confidence in their school boards; others have very little. Most are somewhere between the extremes of the continuum.

If these checkpoints indicate that you might be on the wrong side of the "confidence continuum," there are some corrective measures you can take.

If you're new to the board, listen and learn before taking action. If you're an experienced board member, try the same thing. (Sometimes we don't understand the lesson the first time around.)

If you and your board colleagues sense a confidence problem, look first at the school district's vision. Does it clearly state where the school district is headed and why? Lack of a vision unravels boards and can make board life miserable. Worse yet, it can result in a drifting school district.

If your school district's vision seems to be okay, look next at process -- the way in which the school district does things. Does your district have a process designed to move it toward its vision? Does the process engage people in meaningful ways? Is it systemic and continuous?

Boards that generate confidence project an image of professionalism, fairness, and efficiency. Board members understand their role and their responsibilities. And their agenda is always in the best interest of the entire community.

Checkpoints can provide insights into the way your school board functions. And, they can serve as keys to unlocking public confidence in you and the schools that you represent.

In today's competitive environment, school districts have to focus on creating and keeping customers. This means providing quality programs and services in such a way that people *want* to do business with our schools. These are things that you can't do if your school board is dysfunctional.

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- **How boards conduct their business is as important as the business that they conduct.** Public confidence should increase as people observe you in action. If your board meetings are the hottest program on cable TV, seek help.
- **Preparation, discussion, and honesty often lead to consensus.** It takes hard work to understand the full range of issues and agenda items facing a school

district. When board members take action based on informed consensus, they need to explain what was involved in their decision-making process; e.g., that the item was initiated and reviewed by a committee or task force, that the various components of the item have been researched during the past six months, that the action was taken following public hearings, etc.

Yet, despite the hard work and the explanations, narrow-minded people sometimes say that board members are "rubber stamps." There's nothing wrong with individual board members expressing opposing opinions, of course. And there's nothing wrong with being on the minority side of a vote. It's when opposing opinions are expressed and negative votes are cast simply to avoid the rubber stamp label that they become disruptive.

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- **Asking questions is okay.** Sincere questions demonstrate that you want to learn. Most school board members -- even those who knew everything on the night of their first school board meeting ~ will tell you that it took a year or more before they felt informed about educational matters and comfortable with the responsibilities of being a board member.

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- **School boards are responsible to *all* the people** in their community ... and *all* the students, too. Every decision about every item must be made with the interests of everyone in mind.

School districts are often called school systems. People who study systems tell us that a system is " ... a product of the interdependence of its parts." That is, you can't attend to any part of the system without affecting every other part of the system and, indeed, the system itself.

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- **Every issue is special** even when it's not special to you. When people address the school district through employees or members of the school board, they are expressing some thing of special interest to them. Even if it's not important to you, it's important to them ... and they will judge you by the courtesy and skill with which you respond.
- **Board members are simply citizens until there's a quorum and the meeting is called to order** Unless it's an official board meeting, everything an individual board member does is unofficial. The school district is not well served by school board members who play the Lone Ranger or Rambo.
- **It's important to have a board "understanding"**. Understand how your board "does business." Know what is expected of committee chairs ... what to do when you're uncertain ... who speaks for the board, etc. When things are going well these things aren't important. But guess what? Lack of attention to these things can derail a board, and when things start going downhill these are the things that get really important. Deal with them now.
- **School board members are targets.** People try to pick them off, one at a time. If people are calling you, they're also calling some or all of your colleagues. Make sure you know about those board "understandings." Listen to people, tell them how your school board does business, and steer them to the people who should be helping them.
- **When a majority of the board votes to support A it's time to stop lobbying for B.** In a democratic society, the majority rules. There is dialog and debate, and then a vote. The vote determines outcome and direction. Those who can't shift their thinking to the next discussion undermine the democratic process.

- **Executive sessions are permitted by law so that certain matters can be discussed in confidence.** Leaking confidential information is a violation of the public trust ... and generally disgusting behavior. Enough said.
- **When school board members play "stump the stars." everyone looks bad.** Ambushes and sniping are terrorist techniques, and surprises should be saved for birthdays. Teachers, administrators, and other staff members are usually on the school board agenda to inform or to enhance board member understanding, not to be embarrassed or "raked over the coals."
- **Being visible is important.** When board members attend school events and district activities, people notice. Show up ... look presentable ... be informed ... and emulate sponges. You can share what you "soak up" with your board colleagues at the next meeting.
- **Communication means different things to different people.** Sometimes people say, "You didn't communicate" when they really mean, "I didn't get my way." Don't let people blame things on "poor communication." When things go wrong, it's usually the result of the way you do business or how people get treated in the process. When people say that there has been a communication breakdown, do some serious thinking about what they really mean.