

Special Requests

School board requests for information may make superintendents defensive, but savvy school chiefs know the value of keeping communication channels open

The following fictional case is based on a recent real-life experience, which has been very typical over my quarter century of work with school boards.

The tension in the conference room at district headquarters was palpable. During Superintendent Joyce Hansen's seven-year tenure, the school board-executive working relationship had been generally productive and positive. However, that era of good feeling was rapidly disappearing.

Specifically, this special meeting of Hansen's administrative team had been called to deal with a serious issue that threatened to disrupt the board-executive partnership if left unaddressed: inappropriate communication between certain board members and district executives.

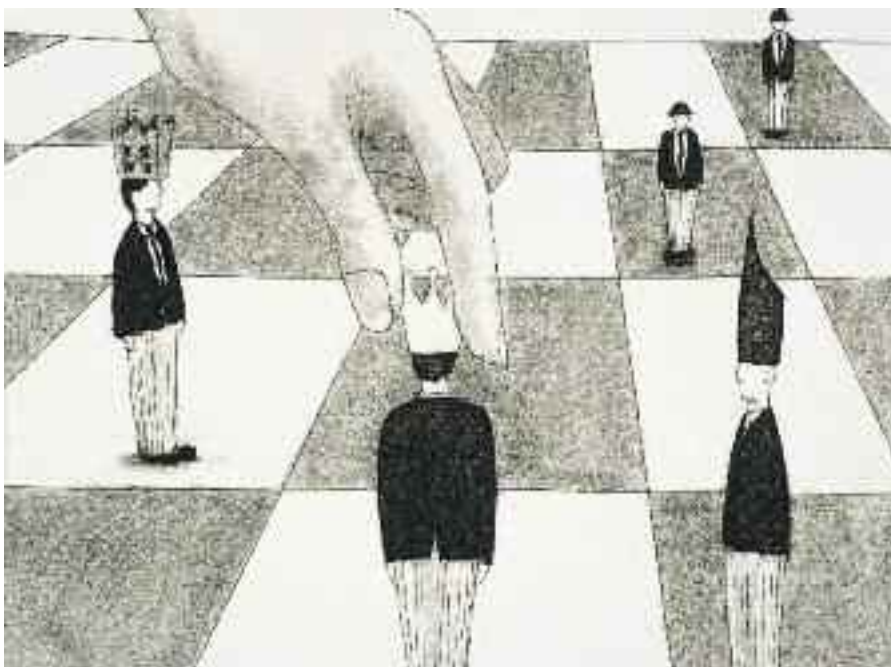
Marilyn Rice and Harry Shapiro were, generally speaking, model board members. They were passionately committed to the district's educational mission, putting student achievement

at the very top of the governing agenda. They faithfully attended committee and board meetings, and did their share in representing the board at district events and community forums. And they were always well prepared for board meetings. Many superintendents would love to have two such dedicated and productive board members, but instead Hansen felt like wringing their necks.

Elected to the board a couple of years ago, Rice and Shapiro were pretty well behaved for the first 18 months of their term. However, over the past six months, they'd both begun to pepper administrators with requests for information. These requests—which sounded to the staff like demands—were anything but routine, and responses often required an hour or more of staff time.

For example, only last week, Shapiro had asked the associate superintendent for finance and administration for a detailed report on administrative out-of-town travel over the past year. And the week before that, Rice had, without warning, showed up at the office of the pupil services director to request a report on participation in middle school after-care programs over the last five years.

The administrators felt caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place. They sincerely wanted to be responsive to board members, but an inordinate amount of time was being spent satisfying their demands. Everyone was rightly worried that other board members would start making these requests, further complicating their lives at headquarters.



Beware of conventional wisdom

Should Hansen and her administrators have been worried enough to schedule a special work session? Without question. Rice and Shapiro were displaying symptoms of micromanagement. Not only were they asking for information that was essentially administrative in nature and not at all pertinent to any governing matters, but also their requests were consuming an inordinate amount of staff time.

And because board members were involved, the requests seemed like directives that staff could ignore only at their peril. The team brainstormed possible actions to avert more micromanagement.

Hansen proposed a strategy that appealed to her team. She would make the full board aware of the growing problem and would recommend a straightforward solution: All board member requests for information would be channeled through the superintendent, who could pass a request along to the appropriate executive team member. If she judged it inappropriate, she would inform the requesting board member.

At first blush, it was an appealing solution: simple, straightforward, and protective of staff. But, fortunately, Hansen decided to discuss the issue with her board chair, Marcie Tompkins, at their regular monthly luncheon meeting.

The superintendent and the board president were an ideal “strategic governing team.” They were both committed to a close board-superintendent-executive team partnership and to supporting each other in carrying out their respective leadership responsibilities. Hansen had learned to trust Tompkins’ thoughtfulness and common sense. She really wanted to involve Tompkins in coming up with a workable solution to this worrisome problem. Not far into their lunch, Tompkins made three points that illustrated the flaws in Hansen’s tentative communication strategy:

1. Frequent, free-flowing communica-

tion between board and administrators was a district tradition that had contributed to a close, positive board-executive working relationship. Creating a bottleneck in the superintendent’s office would hinder that communication and potentially damage that relationship.

2. Explaining the problem to the board and announcing a recommended strategy wouldn’t solve the problem because board members wouldn’t own the solution and hence wouldn’t be committed to implementing it.

3. And even if the majority of board members backed the superintendent’s strategy, there wasn’t a mechanism at the board level for enforcing it, putting the superintendent in the uncomfortable and untenable position of disciplinarian-in-chief.

A workable solution

The solution the superintendent and board president arrived at is one that I’ve seen work very well in many districts and other public and nonprofit organizations over the years.

The starting point is for the superintendent to resist wearing what I think of as the “defender of executive turf hat.” Instead, he or she must embrace the concept that frequent, open communication among board and executive team members is healthy and contributes not only to a positive district culture, but also to a really solid and productive board-executive partnership.

In my experience, this is easier to talk about than actually do because the protective mindset is almost instinctive among many of the public school superintendents I’ve come across over the years. Welcoming open communication tends to feel counterintuitive and even dangerous to many superintendents.

What makes this kind of open board-staff communication workable—and safe—for an administrative team is a clear, detailed set of communication rules that the school board plays an active role in developing, formally adopts, and periodically updates as cir-

cumstances evolve over time.

Many school boards and executive administrators brainstorm the original list of rules in an intensive daylong retreat, and subsequently refine and adopt the list. The list doesn’t need to be long, but it does need to be explicit and reasonably comprehensive so that anticipated potential problems are avoided.

Four of the most critical real-life rules are:

1. School board members may contact the superintendent’s direct reports to obtain information that is pertinent to the governing work of the board.

2. Administrators will communicate the request to staff below the executive level, if necessary.

3. The information requested must be easily available, and supplying it must not require significant staff time.

4. Under no circumstance are individual board members empowered to provide direction to either the superintendent or to any of his or her administrators. Only the board as a whole, speaking as the district’s governing body, can provide direction to the superintendent, and to no other district staff.

If your board uses a committee structure, you can consider forming a board operations or governance committee to be formally responsible for overseeing the application of the communication rules. This committee also would periodically recommend amended and new rules for full board consideration. It is unrealistic to expect the superintendent to be the enforcer of rules involving board member behavior.

With these simple protections in place, your district can realize the benefits of open board, superintendent, and administrator communication with minimal risk of micromanagement from board members. ■

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