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ASBJ Governance: Turning Board Members Into Satisfied Owners

Engaging board members is a top priority for board-savvy superintendents
By Doug Eadie

Everyone was tired but satisfied at the end of their day together. The “strategic work session,” which involved the board, superintendent, and top administrators, had gotten the annual strategic planning cycle off to a great start:

- *Planning committee members had set the stage with their opening presentation on environmental conditions and trends affecting the district, such as the influx of Spanish-speaking students and the continued decline of households with children in the schools.*
- *Nine breakout groups led by board members – meeting in three rounds over the course of the day – generated a tremendous amount of content: preliminary values and vision statements; the identification of issues related to evolving student needs, technology, district finances, the district’s external relationships, and governance, and the exploration of possible change initiatives.*
- *The follow-through process had been affirmed, including the role of the planning committee in coordinating follow-through steps.*

That evening, the superintendent recognized that she and the consultant retained to facilitate the session had made the right call when they convinced planning committee members to open the session with a well-rehearsed conditions/trends presentation and to make board member-led breakout groups a centerpiece of the session. Although at times it’d seemed like a three-ring circus, there was no question that active board member leadership and engagement played a key role in achieving the session’s two principal goals: generating high-quality planning content that could be put to good use in fashioning strategic directions and change initiatives in the coming months; and transforming board members into strong owners of the strategic planning process who could be depended on to provide strong support in following through on the work session.

Chief process designer

This fictional scenario, which draws on years of real-life experience, illustrates how well-designed processes for actively and meaningfully engaging board members early enough to make a significant difference is a tried and true way to transform them into satisfied owners of their governing work. This is a top priority for board-savvy superintendents, who are keenly aware that board members who are strong owners of their governing work make for more reliable partners, primarily because ownership fuels the kind of board commitment that superintendents can depend on in carrying out governing decisions (such as adopting a new vision statement to guide district planning).

Therefore, board-savvy superintendents, wearing their “Chief Process Designer” hat, devote a lot of time and attention to designing processes that will foster board ownership. A less board-savvy superintendent might have taken a more traditional approach to strategic planning less attuned to the human dimension of the board-superintendent working relationship, such as merely retaining

a consulting firm to put together a strategic plan and run it by the board. Of course, shelves are filled with such plans that have gone unimplemented because un-board-savvy superintendents have failed to recognize that audiences for finished staff work don't make for committed owners. Various approaches

Board-savvy superintendents know that board member satisfaction buttresses the commitment that ownership breeds. Although the fundamental path to deep board member satisfaction is engagement in doing important governing work that makes a significant difference in a school district's affairs (such as a major uptick in student achievement), board-savvy superintendents know that regularly meeting board members' ego needs and finding ways to make their governing work more enjoyable are important ways to enhance satisfaction. One reason that board-led breakout groups have become a staple of strategic work sessions like the one described above is that they not only generate substantial, but also provide breakout group leaders with an ego-satisfying experience. Likewise, having board standing committee chairs present committee reports at full board meetings, rather than relying on staff to do all the reporting, serves the same human purpose, and building the regular rotation of chairs into a board's committee guidelines is a tried and true way of spreading ego satisfaction more widely.

A cautionary note regarding the use of breakout groups and standing committees to promote ego satisfaction is in order. Whenever a board member is asked to play a public role in a work session or board meeting, board-savvy superintendents know that they've got to make sure the board member succeeds. They're keenly aware that there's no surer way of turning a board member into an adversary than asking her to accept a responsibility and then allowing her to fail publicly.

This is why a board-savvy superintendent I worked with recently insisted that the board members who would be leading breakout groups in an upcoming planning retreat receive a thorough orientation on the ins and outs of breakout group facilitation and on the specific tasks that each breakout group was being asked to perform in the retreat (such as identifying and assessing financial issues). This is also why board-savvy superintendents go out of their way to help standing committee chairs succeed in leading their committees and in presenting committee reports to the board.

As a really board-savvy superintendent commented recently about her committee chairs, "I make sure I care enough to help them do their very best, and that I'll never let them down."
Finer touches

We've looked at major ways to foster board members' feelings of ownership and satisfaction, but board-savvy superintendents pay close attention to the finer human touches that have a powerful cumulative effect over time, such as making sure that board members are publicly recognized in district publications and the external media and adding spice to the governing process by, for example, rotating board meeting locations among district buildings and building a segment into the board agenda to showcase innovative programs.

This article is excerpted from Doug Eadie's *Governing at the Top: Building a Board-Superintendent Strategic Governing Team* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2014). Doug Eadie (doug@dougheadie.com) is founder and CEO of Doug Eadie & Company. He is the author of 18 books on board and CEO leadership.
