

THE BOARD PRESIDENT'S POST

"A school board president," says a former board member who served in that role, "is a leader among leaders." That's a much better way to think about this important task than simply to view the board president as the convener of meetings and the breaker of ties. An effective board president does much more. The board president must be a good leader, navigator, planner, organizer, communicator, interpreter, confidant, liaison, conscience, caretaker, and troubleshooter.

As one Illinois board member explained: "A board is an association of people who want to accomplish something together. The president must provide the leadership vitality for getting the best out of the individuals. He or she must have a capacity for clarifying generalizations and the ability to articulate aims and goals, to grasp the importance of community and public relations, and to be constructive rather than exploitative. The board president needs sensitivity

and compassion, a confident bearing, trust, respect, and genuine friendliness.”

A former board president enlarged on the theme: “Board presidents are human and, therefore, are motivated by many things, including power and status. But their role also demands that they have some sterling qualities: wisdom, tact, good judgment, knowledge, and charm, among others.”

Regrettably, many board members hold the narrow view of a board president’s role when selecting a board president or seeking the job themselves. As one school leader said, “A board member who lusts for the presidency to obtain the power of the office without positive thought or instructive leadership capability dooms a board to disaster if successful in his or her quest.”

How your board president operates will depend on personal style and skills and on the way board members—including the president—perceive the leadership role. It also will depend on the degree to which the superintendent assists and influences the president on school board operations and district issues.

Before you can perform the many roles of an effective board president, you must understand them. Here’s a closer look at some of them:

President as planner. Effective and detailed planning, both short-range and long-range, is a must for the leader of the school board. Examples of short-range planning include helping to plan the board agenda and planning the orientation process for new board members.

In an NSBA conference workshop, a New Hampshire board president explained: “Usually there is a period of time between election of board members and the time of actually taking part in board meetings. The board president and superintendent should decide the agenda for the orientation process and set the format. If there are a number of candidates running for the board, you (as board president) might wish to start the orientation process early and have an orientation for candidates.”

Her advice for other board presidents: “Early in your presidency, encourage not only new members, but others also, to share their concerns with you. This helps you and your board to know each other better, establishes open relationships, and minimizes hidden agendas.”

Long-range planning involves the goals that have been set for the school district. A board president will want to take an early, overall look at the year ahead. Ask: In the coming year, what plan of action will be in place to reach district goals? What kinds of reports will the board need as the year progresses? How will I, the rest of the board, the administration, and the public judge whether the work toward these goals is on target?

President as organizer. The effective board president can run meetings in an orderly fashion. To do this requires a working knowledge of board policy, a firm grasp of the agenda for each meeting, a command of parliamentary procedure, and some sixth sense of how to use these tools to keep the meeting going smoothly. The president must be able to encourage the open exchange of ideas while continuing to drive for conclusions and decisions.

One board president claims: “I never have trouble running a meeting. People know and respect the rules. Sometimes we have a good battle, but if a situation gets to be tense, I know it needs either to be studied further or voted upon and gotten out of the way.”

Inherent in this statement is the suggestion that a board president shouldn’t shy away from allowing hearty deliberation by board members. But that doesn’t mean you should have interminable discussions on everything. The president must be able to judge when a discussion has ceased to be productive, draw it to a close, and call for a decision. It does mean that the board should not appear to the public to be a rubber stamp for every administrative recommendation; or that the board has reached all its decisions beforehand; or that the board doesn’t do much thinking about the district’s business.

In the words of one board member: “It’s the board president’s task to reach a happy medium, to decide when a sufficient number of details have been discussed, and when it’s time to reach a decision or go on to other matters. If you’re a board president and have a sense of humor—and I sure hope you do—this is a good place to use it.”

President as spokesperson for the board with the media. It is often helpful to have one individual who presents the board’s official position to the public. Typically, the board president fulfills this role.

President as delegator. Closely related to skill in organization is the board president's ability to delegate. In states that allow working committees of the board, board presidents must make committee appointments. To do this, a president must know the strengths, weaknesses, interests, and natural talents of fellow board members and assign committee chairmanships in light of these qualities.

Part of making committee assignments is making sure that committee responsibilities are clearly spelled out and that reporting procedures are clearly understood. The president also must see to it that time for discussion of committee reports is secured on the board agenda.

President as liaison and confidant. The board president must serve as a liaison between the board and the superintendent. It is not reasonable to assume that every board member will love the superintendent or that the superintendent will adore every board member. The board president, though, can help foster a feeling of mutual trust and respect by inter-

preting board action to the superintendent and vice versa.

As with the head of any business or organization, the job of the superintendent often is a lonely one. At a minimum, the board president should share with the superintendent all information and correspondence that involves school operations. But the president can, and usually does, go much farther—offering the superintendent support, serving as a sounding board, giving constructive criticism when needed, and helping the superintendent analyze individual community reactions to district actions.

In turn, the superintendent can keep the board president up-to-date on all phases of the school district. It is important for the president to fully communicate this information to the rest of the board. One board president felt so strongly that she shouldn't know more of the "inside dope" than the rest of her board colleagues that she requested the superintendent to send to the other board members copies of all correspondence and information sent to her as president. "All of us are elected with an equal mandate

PRESIDENTIAL PITFALLS

- Not following parliamentary procedure. If the board president doesn't control discussion, someone else will—or, worse, no one will.
- Not following the agenda. This is the surest way to spring surprises on the superintendent and to make hasty board decisions.
- Selecting a place at the board table where some members and others in the boardroom cannot see you.
- Confusing responsibility with authority. As one former school board president noted, "Although your responsibilities as a board president are different from the responsibilities of other board members, you must recognize that your authority is not. You still have only one vote."
- Not promoting systematic problem solving.
- Permitting the overbearing personalities on the board to appear to represent the entire board's view.
- Not asking for the superintendent's recommendations before requesting a vote.
- Not being prepared to break a tie. Breaking a tie can become a nightmare for presidents who are unprepared. They can avoid some of the problems of tie breaking by studying the issue carefully, by not being caught unaware, and by not making speeches about their votes. (In some states, board presidents always vote, of course.)
- Assuming a vote is unanimous and not asking for "ayes" and "nays." Some votes can get lost this way, and some ill feeling can result.
- Not being consistent.
- Not taking the time to meet and talk with the superintendent about matters that will be presented to the board.
- Failing to resist the temptation to become the superintendent.
- Not planning for crises.
- Not being prepared to be the board's spokesperson.
- Using education jargon when speaking.
- Not taking the time to reflect on the most compelling and urgent obligations confronting the board, order those thoughts creatively and constructively, and share them with the board and superintendent.
- Misusing or overusing executive sessions.

from our communities," she explained, "so all of us should have equal access to the same information."

President as caretaker of relationships. The board president is in an excellent position to help foster good relationships between the board and the staff, the press, the general public, the district, and other community and government organizations, as well as among board members themselves.

The president can encourage board recognition of staff accomplishments and two-way communications with school employees. He or she can ensure that members of the community feel welcome at board meetings and that they have access to the board. The president can maintain communications with other community leaders and government officials and can serve as a board spokesperson to the press. The president can set the tone of board member relationships by speaking of the need for cooperation and mutual respect and by allowing for diversity of opinion.

It has been said that a school board president needs "a tough hide over a very sensitive soul" and "the ability to predict and weather storms."

Some veterans would lead you to believe that the experience of being a board president is mostly bad. As one said, "Everybody on the board should have to be president at least once. Everyone should have their share of the ulcers."

Another board member said, "One would assume that being a school board president is a great chance to be in the community limelight. Unfortunately, when the light is on you, all it generally does is give the critics a target that's easier to hit."

It's true that the board president's post isn't for everyone, but there are benefits. People who have been the president of a school board say they liked it for the opportunity it gave them to develop a close working relationship with the superintendent and staff. The greater demand for the president to become directly involved with program development can also be rewarding.

Some boards regularly rotate their leadership, giving everyone an opportunity to serve. Others choose one individual who is likely to remain as president for several years. There are positives and negatives to both these approaches.

Board presidents also find satisfaction in having an acute awareness of what's going on in the schools and from being known as the leader of the board.

Being board president carries a certain clout with other community leaders. For people who enjoy responsibility, the board presidency is considered a prime position to hold.

Should You Run for Board President?

Do you have the skills needed to head your board? Here's a quiz to help you find out. For each of the following, give yourself a rating from 1 to 5, with 1 being excellent, 3 being average, and 5 being poor. A score of 12 means you're the perfect board president; realistically, anything under 15 is a good indication you should throw your hat in the ring.

1. I work well with others.
2. I am a good listener.
3. I am an effective communicator.
4. My fellow board members trust me, and I do everything I can to maintain their trust.
5. I recognize the strengths of other board members and try to use those strengths to benefit the school system.
6. I know parliamentary procedure.
7. I am fair.
8. I ask good questions.
9. I prepare thoroughly for meetings.
10. I am able to keep cool during heated discussions.
11. I understand the difference between the role of the board president and the role of the superintendent.
12. I am willing to assume the extra duties and responsibilities of serving as school board president.

What Changes When You Become President?

This list was developed by a Wisconsin school board president who notes that not all changes will apply to all presidents or to all members.

Changes for the president:

- The perception of added or new responsibilities
- The perception that you are now charged with setting the direction or tone for the district
- The belief (or illusion) that there is some authority in the position
- The belief that a little more credibility will be given to ideas and suggestions that you offer
- The perception that this is the time to make all those changes that should be made

- Apprehension or a real feeling of power in accepting the position

Changes for the members:

- The perception of an ego trip or power trip by the new president
- The perception that this person now has access to a great deal more information than others on the board
- The perception that this person is no longer "one of us"
- The perception that the president should "fix" a problem, but "share" all decisions
- The belief that you could do a better job as president