

THE PROFESSIONAL GOVERNANCE BOARD

Gary Brochu

The Legacy of Professional Governance

One of the challenges of becoming and operating as a professional governance board is the creation of a legacy. Defining a legacy of professional governance as a culture of professionalism that isn't limited to the members of the current board, but has the potential to extend and influence future members. Building a legacy that extends into the future begins with the work of today. A good place to start is for a board of education to have a willingness to identify and discuss the values and principles that the board stands for, and to then develop procedures and practices so that its actions reflect these values.

While developing board policies that incorporate these values is essential, governance boards should make efforts to ensure that its essential values and beliefs are captured in a clear, understandable manner that easily communicates these values to the members of the board, as well as to those outside of the governance board –potential and future members of the board, and members of the community. One means of capturing and communicating the values of the governance board is through a board member handbook.

One of the benefits of a board member handbook is that it can provide a readily accessible means of creating a board consensus about values and practices when engaging in the process of developing the handbook, in addition to serving as a useful tool in communicating these values and practices to internal and external audiences. The communication of a board's vision, mission and values is an essential element of professional governance and leadership. Simply put, a professional governance board cannot communicate its vision, shared values and sense of mission too often – to the public, to its staff and to its own members.

When a professional governance board utilizes a member handbook in this manner, setting forth in writing its core values, it represents the transcription of ideals into procedures, aspirations set forth as expectations, a board's unspoken assumptions transformed into written requirements. It represents a commitment to a path of professional self-governance beyond a general sense of "getting along" and before conflict develops. It makes the road forward easier since the foundational work of identifying and agreeing on core values has already been done.

Too many boards do not address the essential question of "what do we stand for" until a crisis or conflict forces it to confront this question. Unfortunately, answering this question under the stress of deadlines and conflict is to risk an incomplete or warped answer. Operating in this manner is to create a legacy by default, resting on the shifting sands of expediency instead of on a bedrock of shared values.

Service on a board of education is a responsibility. It's not just about conducting business in a professional manner. It's about leading an institution that makes a meaningful difference in the lives of others. It's about the lives and future of our children. Developing and formalizing an agreement on core values is evidence of a board's acceptance of this responsibility. By making a formal commitment to these values, and developing practices that reflect and codifies them, is to go beyond basic expectations for individual members and toward building a governance board based on that which matters most.

Good governance is not just professional, it is meaningful. Nor is it accidental. It is a conscious choice to pursue professionalism in service of articulated, shared beliefs. Board work is, or should be, purpose-driven work. Making an investment in the work of identifying core values, and codifying and communicating these values via a board member handbook, is an important step in creating a legacy of professional and meaningful governance.