

## **THE PROFESSIONAL GOVERNANCE BOARD**

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### Learning to Develop a Board's Collective Intelligence

One of the most important aspects to understand about operating as a professional governance board is that it functions as a collective body. In fact, it only functions as a collective body, and individual board members do not possess autonomous authority.

Given that a board of education can only act collectively, it is of paramount importance that boards learn to think collectively. The advantage, and the challenge, of having seven or nine or eleven unique, intelligent individuals serving on a governance board is that a properly functioning board has the potential to be more insightful and more intelligent than any individual member of that board. Unfortunately, and far too often, governance boards function with a collective intelligence that is less than the intelligence of any individual member.

There are numerous steps that a board of education can take to foster a sense of collective identity and operate with a collective intelligence. Board retreats, professional development, joint readings, are all techniques that boards can use to help create a collective mindset. But in order to truly encourage, create and sustain a functioning collective board intelligence, let me suggest that a board start with where the work of the board takes place, at its scheduled meetings.

As a collective body, a board of education's decision-making process generally takes place at a public meeting. A presentation is given, a proposal is advanced, a motion made. At this point discussion among board members takes place before a vote is taken. This discussion often serves to frame and shape a board's final action. And the quality of this discussion directly and dramatically influences the quality of a board's collective decision.

The issue that every governing board needs to address concerns the nature of its discussions. Will this discussion be in the form of debate, where each participant presents arguments as to why his view should prevail; or will it be in the form of dialogue, where participants engage in a shared conversation in an effort to achieve a deeper and richer understanding of an issue. The word dialogue comes from the Greek dialogos, which combines the words dia, meaning "through," and the word logos, defined as "word" or "meaning." Thus dialogue is meaning passing or moving through each of the discussion's participants; with the participants seeking a deeper meaning or understanding of a subject, as opposed to working to convince the other participants that she is right and they, alternatively, are wrong.

If the portion of a board's meeting that is dedicated to discussion, or dialogue, among members is to function with a high level of collective intelligence,

collectively seeking to discover the best possible solutions, then board members need to be open to the views, experience and intelligence of other members. Open to the possibility that another member might have a better idea or approach, and open to the concept that collectively the board's intelligence can transcend the intelligence of any individual member. But collective board intelligence is only possible if individuals are willing to suspend their assumptions, are willing to hold their own ideas open for scrutiny, and equally willing to consider and scrutinize the ideas of others.

To function collectively at a high level intelligence, board members need to see and treat each other as colleagues in a shared quest for deeper insight and understanding. Instead of seeing other members as adversaries, view them as colleagues with different, and potentially useful, ideas. Rather than seeking to subtract or minimize their views and contributions, seek instead to add and combine their insights with your own.

In order to facilitate this process, boards of education should look to establish expectations and guidelines for discussion at board meetings. Encourage members to approach meetings as a place to explore ideas and solutions in an intelligent manner, as opposed to the more common and expected contest for control. As an example of these guidelines, the Berlin Board of Education member handbook sets forth in writing the Board's expectation of its members for discussion at meetings. It reads, in part,

“during discussion Board members will listen attentively, consider all points of view, support their positions with facts when possible, be prepared to answer questions from other Board members, focus on the issue at hand, avoid negative and personal comments, and be prepared to compromise, understanding that the goal of debate among Board members is not to prevail but to arrive at the best possible decision for the school district.”

Operating in this manner does not guarantee that a governance board will make good decisions or function with a high degree of intelligence. Nothing can guarantee that. But designing your board meetings to facilitate and encourage a collective approach to seeking the best solutions is an excellent first step to having a board that is more, not less, intelligent than its individual members.