

The Cultured Club

How can you make sure that your board members work through complex issues in a harmonious fashion and treat one other with respect? Define and work on the board's 'culture'

“Y

ou can't believe how negative our board's culture is," a participant in my governance workshop for superintendents and school board members observed several months ago. "I'd really like to know how we can turn things around, because the constant bickering and rude comments are wearing us all out emotionally, and we're building up quite a backlog of unaddressed issues, to boot."

The board member went on to say: "Frankly, it's not much fun being on the board. Actually, it's becoming pretty depressing, and I'm wondering if I'll

run again when my term is up."

Sound familiar? This isn't an unusual lament in my workshops. I frequently hear about dysfunctional board "cultures," and I'm often asked for practical guidance on building a positive one. My initial response is always, as it was on this most recent occasion, to ask for a definition of "culture."

It never takes long to establish that "culture" is an amorphous concept that's hard to get your arms around, and that it means lots of things to different people. For example, to the participants in this particular workshop it

meant "what it feels like on this board," "our shared values," "how we treat each other in our deliberations," "our guidelines for interacting with each other," and "how we go about doing our governing work," to mention just a few of the responses.

Without trying to pin the concept down precisely, let's just say that a board's culture reflects the beliefs, principles, and attitudes about working together in the governing enterprise. We know a positive board culture when we see it: Members work through complex issues in a harmonious fashion and treat one other with respect.

When a board culture is described as "dysfunctional," in my experience, it usually means that the governing process is either highly adversarial and/or characterized by uncivil interactions, and it almost always takes a tremendous toll over time, not just in terms of emotional stress, but also in poor decision-making.

So what can we do to build a positive board culture that is conducive to high-impact governing?

Changed attitudes not enough

Experience has taught me that there's no point in trying to preach to board members or teach them how to become a more positive, cohesive governing team. More effective, but not by much, is the formal team-building or human relations approach. I often tell workshop participants a true story to illustrate the point.

A few years ago I was retained to work with a school board that, six months earlier, had spent a whole weekend engaging in team-building exercises in a sylvan setting 25 miles



away from the district office. They worked with a very capable facilitator, as far as I could tell.

The event clearly met the “touchy-feely” gold standard. My early interviews with board members indicated that they really had gotten to know one another more deeply over the course of this very intensive weekend. They’d told one another the stories of their lives—where they’d grown up, about their mates and kids, the progression of their careers and interests—and had gotten down to brass tacks in terms of identifying barriers to communicating effectively.

They even managed to fashion a detailed set of guidelines for working together. One example was, “We will without fail treat each other with respect, never impugning each other’s motives or personally attacking each other; we will listen respectfully to each other’s points when considering an issue, without interruption; we will never cut each other down publicly, even though we might disagree vehemently on a particular issue under consideration.”

As I listened to the accounts of this weekend in my interviews, I couldn’t help but be impressed by the nostalgia board members felt about the experience. It was clearly a shining milestone in their history, and I even felt tears—well, maybe a tear or two—as board members described the weekend.

A fading glow

So, you might rightly ask at this point, why was I retained to work with this board when it already had gone through an intensive team-building experience? The fact is, it was anything but a cohesive governing team when I entered the picture, and the warm glow of that intensive weekend together hadn’t lasted long.

When I arrived, bickering was rife, tensions were high, nerves were badly frayed, and issues were piling up unaddressed. It hadn’t taken long to erase

the glow as they worked to deal with challenging governing questions.

The district was dealing with, among other things, a serious budget shortfall projected for the year after next, demographic shifts that raised the issue of redrawing building boundaries, a seriously underperforming elementary school, and growing community opposition to a critical capital construction tax levy under consideration.

So why, when the board had been well trained to work together as a governing team and everyone agreed to guidelines for civil discourse, did the problems persist?

In a nutshell, the board members returned to basically the same governing organization they had left when they set out for the retreat. It was the same governing structure with the same governing processes. Attitudes changed, commitments changed, the people changed, but the governing organization they returned to was the one they’d left. So it didn’t take long to erase the glow.

A balanced approach

What was the solution? Put simply, structure and process had to be updated so that new attitudes and commitments could be translated into concrete governing results. In other words, the governing architecture needed to be modernized.

Over the years, I’ve learned again and again that high-impact boards that make a significant difference in their districts’ affairs—the ones that handle the truly high-stakes, really complex issues effectively—marry the board members’ commitment to a well-designed structure and process. The result is a positive board culture.

This particular story had a happy ending. We employed a task force of board members and the superintendent to come up with very detailed, practical enhancements in board structure and governing processes, including standing committees that correspond to the

board’s basic governing functions (board operations, planning and development, performance monitoring, and community relations).

The task force also developed a well-designed process for board involvement in strategic and operational planning/budget development.

By marrying structure and process to attitude—pairing people with the “machine,” if you will—we made it possible to build and maintain a positive, productive board culture with real staying power.

Isn’t that what we’re all seeking? ■

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