

On Board

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The Board Chair – A Governance V.I.P.

Every board member is important to effective school governance. However, if there is a “first among equals” on a board, the board chair is that person. Who should serve as the board chair? Why is this position so critical to a board’s success? What gifts and qualifications should be considered when electing or appointing a chair? These are some of the interesting questions explored in this issue of ON BOARD.

Leadership, leadership, leadership! It is evident that organizations really do rise or fall on leadership. It is also evident that the challenges of serving as an effective leader are growing. The complexities of organizational management are increasing. So, too, are the expectations others place on those who are in positions of leadership. Whether the leader is in a paid position or serves as a volunteer, the personal investment required to serve as a leader are considerable.

One of the important leaders in Lutheran schools is the person who is appointed or elected to serve as the board chair. For a variety of reasons, the effectiveness of the chair has much to do with the success of the board’s efforts. Many of us have the privilege of serving on a board with an effective chair. Under such leadership, meetings run smoothly and in a timely fashion, much is



accomplished, and board members experience a high degree of satisfaction and mutual trust.

Perhaps some of us have also served on a board that was not blessed with an

effective leader. Such experiences are usually not pleasant. Confusion and conflict are commonplace. Meetings are not efficiently managed.

Little seems to get accomplished and there is doubt about the value of the board’s efforts.



The work of a Lutheran school board is important.

Because it is so important, considerable effort needs to be invested in the process of selecting a board chair. While every board member brings unique gifts to the board, all board members may not have the gifts to serve as board chair. Identifying the skills and qualities needed for service as board chair is a responsibility of the entire board. So, too, is identifying those on the board who possess these skills and qualities.

Roles of the Board Chair

The importance of the board chair is evident as one considers the many roles that the position

requires. An effective chair serves as a...

Manager – The board chair coordinates the activities of the board, including the development of board agenda, establishing board meeting schedules, setting goals for each meeting, and seeing that the board room is set up in a manner conducive to conducting board business.

Facilitator – The chair needs to be skilled at Encouraging discussion around the board table. In this role, the chairs designs the format to be used to address various agenda items, guides discussions in such a way that all voices are heard and respected, and helps the board process and synthesize information and opinions so that the board can take appropriate action.



Team builder – An important role for the board chair is to assure that both the task and interpersonal dynamics of the board team are nurtured. Task dynamics involve understand the work to be accomplished, having appropriate information and data to address issues, and problem solving. Interpersonal dynamics include helping board members feel accepted by the group and building trust among all board members. Both dynamics must be present for the board to function as an effective team.

Conflict Manager – A wise person once said that conflict is inevitable, but enemies are an option. Conflict is necessary for any group to function effectively and creatively. The board chair's role is to help manage conflict, exercising care so that conflict is not avoided or discouraged, but that it is useful in creating new ideas and resolving problems. At the same time, the chair's role is to make sure that disagreements do not result in animosity or adversarial relationships.

Leader – Like members of all work groups, board members expect and need leadership. The leadership role of the board chair includes providing vision, integrity, and encouragement for the work of the board. In a very real sense,

the board chair is expected to serve as a model of effective board membership to other members of the board.

Connector – Most Lutheran schools are either owned by, or are closely aligned with, the ministry of a congregation. When this is the case, the board chair, in partnership with the school principal, plays an important role as a link between the school board and the congregation's governing board. This includes helping both groups remain clear about their responsibilities and communicating issues and concerns of mutual interest.

Partner – The board chair is an important partner and collaborator with the school principal or director. The chair helps interpret the board's needs to the principal and helps the principal to be an effective resource to the board. Often, boards empower the chair to meet with the principal between board meetings to establish board agendas and to establish priorities for board activities. In addition, the board chair is in an ideal position to serve as caregiver to the principal on behalf of the board, listening and advising so that the principal remains healthy and effective personally and professionally.

Qualities of an Effective Board Chair

What kind of person can successfully fulfill the many roles required of the board chair? By the grace of God, many different gifts and leadership styles can be used to provide competent leadership.



A person blessed with most, or all, of the following qualities may be an especially effective board leader:

Discernment – As its leader, it is very important to help the board make wise decisions. To do so requires the ability to prayerfully seek God's will and to be aware of the signs God provides for direction and understanding.

Patience – Board work is group work. Group work takes time! An effective board chair must be able to allow time for people with diverse thinking and communication styles to express their options and process information.

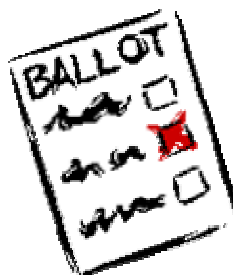
Listener – Every board member should be a good listener. However, for a board chair, this skill is important. To chair a board meeting requires the ability to listen carefully to what is being said and to be attuned to body language and other non-verbal communication that provide clues to the feelings and needs of other board members.

Mission focused – It is critical for a board's chair to understand, to be excited about, and to be committed to the school's mission. The board chair must also have the ability to help the board stay focused on the mission and not get 'side-tracked' by other agendas or issues.

Time to serve – Service as a board chair requires a significant investment of time. Candidates for board chair should be made aware of the responsibilities of the position and the time required and should indicate clearly whether they will be able to fulfill these expectations.

Team builder – A successful board chair understands the elements of effective teams and enjoys working as part of a team. He or she believes that the board can accomplish more together than its members could individually.

Experience – It is very helpful for a board chair to have previously served as a school board member. School boards that are intentional



about leadership development often identify board chairpersons one term in advance of their period of service and establish a mentoring relationship between the current and future board chair.

Selecting a Board Chair

It is not unusual for the process of selecting a board chair to be an uncomfortable experience for some board members. Certain individuals

may feel qualified to serve as chair, but hesitate to promote themselves. Others fear hurt feelings resulting from who is included or excluded from the list of nominations. Still others may want to serve for reasons that are not necessarily helpful for the effectiveness of the board.

The importance of an effective board chair requires that board members are intentional about the selection process. As is the case with the selection of a school principal or director, time and energy invested in the selection process pays a big dividend when an effective leader is identified. A prayerful process that weighs the responsibilities of the position, the personal qualities needed, and the gifts of each member of the board will help ensure that an appropriate choice is made.



An accurate volunteer position description for the board chair is a helpful tool for this process. When a board utilizes a nominating committee for recommending new board members, this same committee can be charged with the responsibility of recommending to the full board persons it feels are qualified to serve as chair and as other board officers.

Making It Work

The servant leadership of the board chairperson is not focused on ego or power. It is a sacrificial service involving a willingness to use one's gifts, both strengths and weaknesses, to the glory of God and for the sake of the ministry of the school the board has been called to govern.

Once a board chair and other officers of the board are elected or appointed, these individuals need the assistance and support of all board members. Praying for these people to stay strong, healthy and effective in their roles is essential. So, too, is trust, encouragement, and understanding.

For Further Discussion

Recall a time when you served on a board that you felt was particularly effective. Describe the behaviors and attitudes of the person who served as chair of that board. What qualities made this person successful in the role of board chair?

In your opinion, how effective is your board's process of identifying and selecting the board chair and other officers of the board? Are there any ways that your process could be improved?

For Further Study

By the grace of God, ON BOARD continues to be developed as a service to Lutheran school board members. This issue marks the beginning of its sixteenth year of production!

All sixty past issues of ON BOARD continue to be made available to school board leaders. For an order form, contact the author using the information provided below.

P.S.

The triennial national convocation of the Lutheran Education Association is drawing near. The dates are April 7-9, 2005. Does your school budget include provisions for attendance by your school's faculty and administration? Information about the convocation is available on the L.E.A. web site at www.lea.org.

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