

On Board

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School Board Leadership: Which Mode Are You In?

Have you thought recently about the ways your board leads the development of your school? Do you ever wonder whether your board is acting in appropriate ways? Do you ever sense that your board has the potential to make a greater contribution to the success of the school than it current is? This issue of On Board describes three important aspects of board leadership and helps you explore the implications of each of these for your board's effectiveness.

Jane has just completed her first year of school board service. The experience has been interesting. Board meetings at Trinity Lutheran School consist mainly of receiving and approving reports from the principal. While most board discussions are focused on issues initiated by the principal, Jane believes the board does an especially good job of monitoring the school's finances. This is not a surprise to Jane, since she and several other members of the school board have expertise in finance and investment.

Hector has enjoyed several years of experience as a member of the Messiah Lutheran School board. What he particularly values is the large amount of time his board invests in developing vision and plans for the school.



Setting goals is a high priority. Reports provided by the principal focus on progress toward these goals. The board recently updated the school's strategic plan and is now in the process of receiving input from the school staff, parents, and congregation leaders.

As a member of the St. Paul Lutheran school board, George finds himself regularly engaged

during board meetings in problem solving, brainstorming new ideas and discussing creative possibilities for achieving the school's mission. George senses that the school principal greatly values the opportunity to take advantage of the expertise of various board members. She seems to appreciate the opportunity to gain new insights and perspectives, especially when she is in the process of making major operational decisions.

Each of the school boards described above is engaged in legitimate leadership activity.

Interestingly, each board has focused its attention in a different mode of leadership. Each operates with a primary style of



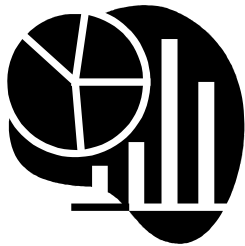
leadership that may be based on tradition, the expertise of the board chair, the encouragement of the school principal, or the interests of a majority of its members.

Is one of these modes of leadership more appropriate for a school board than the others? Is each best suited for a particular circumstance? Is it possible for a board to balance its leadership efforts among all three modes?

In a new and insightful book titled *Governance as Leadership*, authors Richard Chait, William Ryan, and Barbara Taylor identify three leadership modes that nonprofit boards typically use. They describe these as fiduciary, strategic, and generative leadership. They contend that each is important to board effectiveness. They observe, however, that the amount that each mode is utilized varies greatly from board to board.

Fiduciary Leadership

Fiduciary leadership is, perhaps, the aspect of leadership most commonly thought of when one considers the work of a board. In fact, governing boards are expected, by the statutes and regulations governing not-for-profit organiza-



tions, to operate as ‘fiduciaries,’ accountable as a group for serving as effective and wise stewards of the organization’s mission and assets. In other words, boards are ultimately respon-

sible for the effective and appropriate operation of the organization they serve.

Lutheran school boards exercising fiduciary leadership engage in a variety of activities in order to carry out this responsibility, such as:

- Engaging in regular audits of the schools financial records;
- Identifying relevant local, state, and federal laws and monitoring compliance;
- Receiving reports from the school principal regarding the effectiveness of various aspects of school ministry;
- Ensuring that sound fiscal policies and practices are in place;
- Monitoring goals that have been established for the school.

Fiduciary activity is absolutely necessary for a governing board. Competent fiduciary leadership is required by the government in return for the privileges awarded not-for-profit organizations, such as tax exempt status. Equally important for any organization, its customers and stakeholders expect the board to operate

effectively as a fiduciary. Stories about organizations, both for-profit and not-for-profit, who have failed to carry out this important function effectively, have been increasingly documented in recent years. Because of this, leaders of these organizations face increasing scrutiny by civil authorities and by the general public. Organizations whose boards fail to meet the expectations of fiduciary accountability place at risk the reputation, support, and even the survival of the organization.

Strategic Leadership

Boards who engage in strategic leadership are also fulfilling an important responsibility. Acting on behalf of all of the organization’s ‘owners,’ a board exists to help ensure the long-term existence of the institution and effective pursuit of its mission. To do this requires attention to and involvement with many strategic issues, including:

- Defining the organization’s mission;
- Identifying the core values that provide the basis for the mission;
- Expressing a vision for the organization;
- Being aware of the many internal and external factors that impact effectiveness;
- Aligning organization structure and systems;
- Establishing strategic goals that reflect important priorities in pursuit of the mission.

Most boards engage the services of a chief executive officer, president, or administrator who works with the board to establish vision and action. The principal is given this authority in most Lutheran schools.

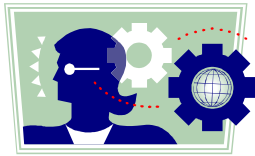
Sometimes boards mistakenly assume that the “C.E.O.” is solely responsible for establishing vision and establishing plans to achieve the vision. The person serving in this executive staff position must lead the board in many ways while, at the same time, being accountable to the board. For the executive and the board to be effect in carrying out their responsibilities, both need to be involved in the identification, consideration, and resolution of strategic issues.



Generative Leadership

As generative leaders, board members engage in discussions and activities that produce and explore creative new ideas, solve problems, and envision possibilities. To provide this type of leadership, boards draw from the unique perspectives, experiences, and gifts that each member of the board possesses. Boards that regularly operate in a generative mode highly value diversity among board members, recognizing that variety of background and expertise brings value to the creative process.

Generative leadership can be easily misunderstood. If not utilized correctly, generative discussions can cross the boundary between board and staff responsibilities, risking board ‘micromanagement’



of administrative responsibility. Indeed, boards that are not careful in the exercise of generative leadership can

find themselves investing most of their time on crisis management and short-term interests. To protect against this danger, board policies that clearly delineate the responsibilities of the board and the authority that it gives to the executive are very helpful and important.

When utilized appropriately, the benefits of generative leadership far outweigh the risks. Generative leadership provides a collaborative advantage that allows for greater creativity in identifying options and ideas for problem solving and decision making than any one individual can produce.

Which Mode of Leadership Should We Use?

As these descriptions indicate, each of these modes has an appropriate place in the repertoire of board leadership. Effective boards engage in activities related to each style of leadership, as situations and circumstances dictate. Operating with a ‘balanced portfolio’ of leadership modes will contribute to board effectiveness and will maximize the use of the gifts and talents of each board member. In this regard, boards will benefit when they...

- Engage in regular discussions about modes of board leadership;
- Establish clear charter statements and policies that establish the leadership responsibilities and boundaries for the board and chief executive;
- Hold board members accountable to remaining focused on ‘big-picture’ issues.

Making this work in a Lutheran School

Lutheran schools are blessed with talented, experienced individuals who give willingly of their time to serve on the school board. They want to make a positive difference in helping the school be an effective place of ministry to students and families. To do so requires the use of all available leadership tools. Utilizing all three of the leadership modes – fiduciary, strategic, and generative leadership – can help ensure that the board is operating at full effectiveness.

Given the variety of governing structures in Lutheran schools and congregations, care must be taken to adapt these leadership modes to the role of the school board. For example, a school board that is chartered by a church council or congregation board of directors needs to understand the extent and limits of its governing authority related to the school. However, even when a school board does not have ultimate governing authority, it can still utilize fiduciary, strategic, and generative leadership as it fulfills its charter. In addition, a Lutheran school board can help the other boards of the church as it models effective board leadership by utilizing each leadership mode appropriately.



For Further Discussion

What mode of board leadership does your board utilize most often – fiduciary, strategic, or generative? Which leadership mode does your board should utilize the least? What are the reasons for your board’s leadership mode preference? What can your board do to make sure that it is using each mode of leadership as it carries out its responsibilities?

For Further Study

The Commission for Ministerial Growth and Support of The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod recently released a helpful new resource entitled *Let’s Talk It Over: 10 Conversations on Supporting Church Workers*. It is an interactive resource in DVD and print format that includes case studies, discussion tools, and Bible study resources. For information about ordering this new resource, call 314-996-1378.

P.S.

The Lutheran Education Association (www.lea.org) and the Evangelical Lutheran Education Association (www.eleanational.org) both continue to provide great service and great benefits to Lutheran educators. If you are a school of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, be sure to make it possible for your faculty members to be active members of L.E.A. If yours is a school of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, make sure that it is an active member of the E.L.E.A.

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