

Governance: A Superintendent's View

Keeping the board/CEO relationship healthy is critical if you want to maintain a positive and productive working relationship that benefits everyone

Last month, I shared highlights from a wide-ranging, three-hour discussion of governance and board-superintendent relations with MaryEllen Elia, superintendent of the Hillsborough County Schools in Tampa Bay, Fla.

That column touched on the philosophy Elia brings to her work with the school board, what she sees as her board's preeminent strengths as a governing body, and her take on why the board found her the most attractive candidate for the district's top job in 2005.

Here are further highlights from our fascinating afternoon together.

You've given me the impression of a very positive and productive working partnership with your board. What are some practical things you do to keep this partnership healthy?

The governing function is one of my top CEO priorities, so I really do pay considerable attention to keeping my working relationship with my board close and positive. Experience has taught me that a solid relationship must be based on mutual respect, and I'm sure that the attitude I bring to my work with the board makes a real difference in terms of building a cohesive board-superintendent team.

I'm what you'd call a board-friendly superintendent. I believe in strong board leadership, and my board knows

it. That's an indispensable foundation for any partnership. Also I commit substantial time to working with my board—at least a full day on average every week, if not more. A good deal of that time is spent creatively thinking about ways I can engage my board members to make full use of all of the talent, experience, expertise, and community contacts they bring with them to the boardroom.

The personal dimension of building and maintaining a solid working relationship with the board is critical, so I make a point of meeting one-on-one with each member on a bi-weekly basis. This is by far the most effective way for me to get to know my board members—their special concerns; their aspirations as members of the district's governing body; their decision-making styles; the way they acquire and process information. For example, do they want detailed written reports?

Governing is a people-intensive process, as well as a team endeavor. The better my board members and I know each other, the more likely we are to work well together on the governing front.

What other types of things do you and your staff, especially your cabinet, do to keep this partnership operating smoothly?

There are many other practical things. For example, we make a real effort to ensure that board members are never caught off-guard, put on the defensive, or embarrassed because they're not in the know on a breaking issue. It's our job to make sure they're always in the know on the biggies.

We also look for every opportunity to engage board members proactively—early in the process, rather than at the tailend—in addressing strategic and policy-level matters. A recent example comes to mind. For the past several months, the district has been going through a wide-ranging update of policies in every functional area. I've made sure that board members are involved intensively—from the get-go—in examining those policies as they relate to board and superintendent roles, responsibilities, and interaction.

Another thing we do is make sure that board members are made aware of events in the district and the wider community that they might want to participate in. We facilitate that participation with the help of three full-time secretaries whose time is dedicated to supporting our seven board members.

You obviously pay close attention to your working relationship with the board. What about your board chair?

This is a primo relationship and top priority, not only because my board chair can be a powerful advocate for actions I'm taking to the board, but also because there's real potential for stepping on each other's toes if we're not careful. This is especially true in the external arena, since we're both considered spokespeople for the district.

I make three promises to every new board chair: (1) I want you to succeed as leader of the board, and I'll do anything within reason to help you do so. (2) I'll get to know you well enough to understand your special interests and aspirations as board chair—what you're most interested in getting involved in and the goals you hope to achieve—and I'll do what I can to get you involved and to help you achieve your goals. (3) And I'll always defer to you in public when we're out in the community together; no one will doubt that you're the district's primary spokesman.

To the best of my—and my staff's—ability, we deliver on these three promises. For example, we have a custom of involving the board chair in monthly meetings with me and my top executives—at which we develop the detailed board meeting agenda—so our chair is always in the driver's seat at board meetings, intimately familiar with the items on the agenda and able to lead discussion. When I have a board chair who's really interested in getting involved in an area, say, community economic development, I'll go out of my way to facilitate that involvement, including seeing that my chair is invited to key meetings.

And when we're attending meetings together, I make a point of treating my board chair as the district's primary representative. I never, ever upstage my chair; she or he is always the center of attention out in the community.

Over the years, I've come across a number of superintendents who tend to guard their staff from much contact with their board members. Where do you come down on this question?

That's easy to answer, Doug. I'm definitely not an old-time bottleneck CEO who jealously guards my top lieutenants from interacting with my board members. On the contrary, my top executives are encouraged to answer

“I really do believe that governing is a team effort, and the team always includes my senior executives”

board members' questions, and to meet one-on-one with board members to brief them on issues.

I've mentioned the two- to four-hour board workshops we regularly hold to examine complex issues. My senior executives always attend, and they actively participate in discussion with the board. You'd never see my execu-

tives sitting on the sidelines in these meetings; they're always in the thick of the discussion.

In a large, incredibly complex educational enterprise like the Hillsborough County Schools, any other approach would be counterproductive. As I said at the beginning of our discussion, I really do believe that governing is a team effort, and the team always includes my senior executives. ■

Doug Eadie (doug@dougeadie.com), an *ASBJ* contributing editor, is founder and CEO of Doug Eadie & Company. He is the author of 17 books on board and CEO leadership, including *Five Habits of High-Impact School Boards* (Scarecrow Education and National School Boards Association, 2005).