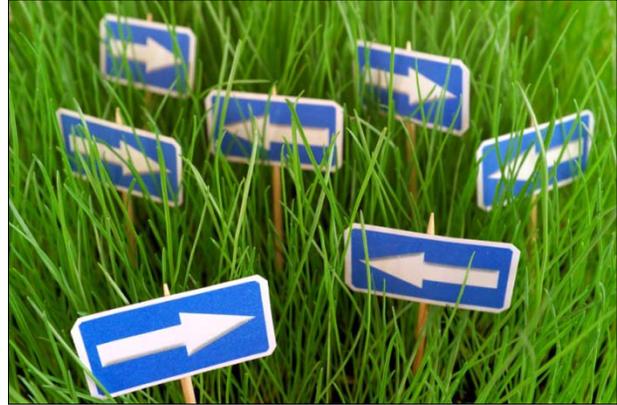


As with any team, goals should be set annually, or more frequently, to guide actions and measure success. This is discussed in more detail in the next section.



2. **Community Ambassadors:** A well-formed board should effectively link the school to its community and its resources. Thus, board members should perform the function of ambassadors to that community. This means more than just public relations, though that is an important piece. Board members should also help build relationships, negotiate business opportunities, open lines of communication, and otherwise use their own professional network to benefit the mission.
3. **Fundraising:** “Among the most valuable resources a board member can bring to an organization are his or her relationships and connections to potential funders, partners and supporters,” explains Ken Deemer, Board President at *Environmental Charter Schools*. Board members should lead the organization in contributing and assembling financial resources for the school. Many small and/or startup schools do not feel comfortable asking for individual board member donations or individual fundraising requirements. While some schools may worry that such a requirement would deter potential board involvement, others might argue that a board member cannot effectively raise money until he or she has made a personal financial commitment, no matter the size. Regardless, the personal and professional networks of board members, as well as their skills and experiences, are crucial elements when it comes to fundraising. Board members should be involved in fundraising planning, and should understand exactly how they can contribute to the success of the plan.

Roles to Avoid

It is also important to note what should *not* be included in the role of the board. The board exists to govern, not manage. Thus, while it is the role of the board to establish the right policies and procedures to allow the organization to carry out its mission, it is *not* the role of the board to carry out all activities related to the mission. Also, while it is the responsibility of the board to hire, fire and hold accountable the school director, it is *not* the role of the board to manage the employees who work for the school director. Especially in the area of oversight, it is important that the board focus on *helping to build the system* and *making sure the system is working*, but leave the day-to-day system operation to the school director and his/her staff. The following examples help illustrate the importance of understanding what is *not* the role of the board:

1. **Lost in the Details:** Fiscal oversight is an important board function. An effective board will have procedures in place to review the school’s budget and financial performance on a regular basis (typically monthly). The board should be prepared to question significant overspending in any budget category, or to guide large purchase decisions. However, the board should not spend time reviewing and/or approving individual transactions or other, smaller details. Such behavior may seem manageable early on in the school’s life, but will quickly take over meeting agendas

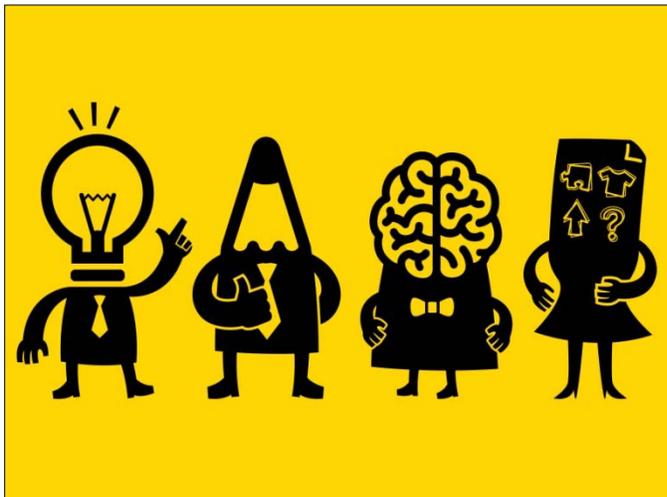
and valuable time and energy. Additionally, this will create unnecessary bureaucracy for the school leader.

- 2. Who's My Boss?** An effective board will hire, support, develop and (if necessary) fire the school director. And, just as importantly, an effective board will delegate and depend upon its school director for operations. This includes the day-to-day management of the school, including the school staff. While the board can and should be available to the school staff for support, board members should not intervene as managers. Doing so is not only organizationally inefficient, but undermines the authority of the school leader.

How the Board Operates

As with any team, even an all-star roster can quickly prove ineffective without the right operational procedures in place. It is worth the time and energy early in the life of a board to set up proactive policies and procedures by which the board will not only govern, but also operate. There are several facets of this leadership to consider:

- **Individual Role Definitions:** Boards – and school leaders – frequently find themselves faced



with one or more board members who simply do not carry their weight in terms of attendance or contributions. Proactive measures to avoid this situation include clear job descriptions during board member recruitment, and the frequent re-visiting of these descriptions. At least once a year, board members should talk as a group about individual responsibilities, edit them as necessary, and agree to them. Some boards may choose for its members to sign contracts with the school.

It is important to understand that such a relationship must work both ways. Board members volunteer their time because they believe in the mission, but often they also view it as a professional opportunity or otherwise beneficial experience. It is important to understand why each board member is present, and to the extent that is possible, cater to individual motivations with appropriate roles and responsibilities. The board president may take on the responsibility of regularly checking in with individual board members to discuss how the relationship is going.

- **Defining the Board's Functional Role:** As previously discussed, the board's role can and should extend beyond oversight, and the board's functional role should also be well-defined at the start. This often means drawing the lines between the responsibilities of the school leader and the responsibilities of the board. This should include a distinction between the decisions that will be made by the board, the decisions that the board will weigh in on, and the decisions that the board will simply hear about after they are made. It is important to clearly define and establish these expectations up front, before lines get cloudy and operations become inefficient.

Here, it is important that the board and the school leader develop not only policies, but also procedures and processes by which these policies will become a reality in operations. For each of the types of decisions listed above, there should be a process in place. That process should be reflected in board meeting agendas. For example, if part of the fiscal policy calls for board approval of purchases over \$10,000, there should be a process in place by which the board can efficiently make purchasing decisions. This may consist of a template that the school director fills in with relevant information such as the reason for the purchase, the timeframe, and quotes from several vendors. The template becomes an agenda item, is presented to the board, and voted upon.

- **Goal Setting:** As mentioned above, goal setting is a valuable tool for any team, whether or not it is part of a larger strategic planning effort. Simply put, the board must understand what it's trying to do. As any board member or school director knows, there are plenty of details and fire drills to keep everyone busy on a day-to-day basis, as well as to fill a monthly board agenda. This is by no means an easy task; organizations and corporations around the globe struggle with this every day. But it is important that the board maintain a consistent focus on the bigger picture, understand how to move forward the mission of the organization, and have the ability to actually move the needle. Jill Marks, Director at *Gateway to College Early College High School* in Riverside, speaks to this importance, "Strategic planning at [our school] is an inclusive, data-driven and reflective process. Our board, community members, staff, faculty and students work together to fulfill our charter school's mission by clarifying our core values and commitments around measurable goals and strategies that are accomplished through action plans. Strategic planning focuses our direction as stakeholders and action plans provide planning and evidence that our school meets and potentially exceeds our expectations for student achievement, program improvement and school sustainability."

At the beginning of the year (or more frequently), the board should agree on several "big picture" goals, such as finding a new facility or formulating a plan for future growth. The board may choose to assign roles or committees to these initiatives. At this time the board should also discuss smaller milestone goals, and when and how progress will be measured throughout the year. Time should be given to these initiatives on board meeting agendas. In this way, the board will maintain a consistent focus on the bigger picture, which could easily be pushed off or forgotten in the midst of smaller, day-to-day issues throughout the year. This will also help the board move from problem solving to the creation and pursuit of opportunities, which is necessary for growth.

- **Evaluation:** The board is accountable to a variety of stakeholders, but should also be accountable to itself. As such, the board should put a system in place to effectively hold itself accountable. Many organizations choose to utilize an annual board review process. During this review, the board as a group should revisit the goals that were set at the beginning of the year, as well as the measures of progress and success that were decided upon. The board should openly discuss whether or not they were successful, and should implement changes for the coming year that will help them be more successful. Bruce Greenspon, Board Vice-President at *Environmental Charter Schools*, sums this idea up nicely: "The board of directors demands organizational accountability; successful nonprofit organizations demand board of director accountability...Too often the nonprofit world approaches board of directors' accountability as a patchwork if at all. Clear, explicit, written board member objectives and expectations are critical to ensure the board knows what is expected of them. Each year, our board members re-sign

board commitment documents, recommitting to their objective expectations. After signing, we utilize a board of director self-evaluation worksheet, which is very effective at driving self-improvement, and in some cases, self-attrition. But why wait for a yearly self-evaluation to hold the board accountable? [We have] instituted a board of directors dashboard, which includes measurements against the board expectations; we review it at each governance committee meeting and report it back at each board meeting. Our organization knows how the board members are measuring themselves against their commitment – they see it at every board meeting. We also use a board meeting evaluation tool, which drives critical reflection at the end of each meeting. Take away: how do we hold the organization accountable if we're not accountable? We grow when we know we're being measured."

There are also board evaluations and checklists available from outside organizations that may help a board determine its effectiveness, as well as diagnose areas for improvement. An additional best practice is for individual board members to evaluate themselves. If members signed a contract, this can be revisited at this time, as well as the role description or other set of individual expectations. Board members may request peer evaluations, or may set up time to talk about their contributions with either the board chair or the school director.

The most important part of any evaluation exercise is not just the identification of improvement areas, but the formulation of tangible action plans to improve. These action plans can carry into the next year's goal setting process.

Contingency Planning

Though requiring time and effort, board participation can often seem easy until something goes wrong, or at least not according to plan. This may come in the form of a personnel issue, a lawsuit, an inner-board conflict, or any number of nightmarish situations. While no one can plan for everything, a board should be as proactive as possible. In times of conflict, what often makes the situation worse is not having a plan or policy in place, and thus even more conflict stems from deciding on an appropriate response to the problem. There are a number of proactive practices that can largely pay off in the long term:



- **Channels of Communication:** The importance of having clear channels of communication is amplified in difficult times. For example, when a school director is having difficulties with the board, he or she may find it difficult to bring up or express a problem. However, if the school director has been in the habit of regularly checking in with individual board members, it becomes much easier to address concerns as they arise. For example, the school director may feel as though the board has been slow to act on securing a needed line of credit, putting a strain on cash flow. If the school director regularly checks in with individual board members, this concern can be brought up calmly and casually, long before it becomes an emergency. To facilitate such regular communication, the school director may choose to have coffee with one board member before every meeting. In general, board members should regularly and frequently attend meetings, and should make themselves accessible to the school director and

each other. Additionally, performance evaluations for the school leader by the board can serve as a mechanism for ensuring expectations and goals are clearly known by all involved. Jayna Gaskell, Executive Director of *Pivot Charter Schools*, notes the importance of regular performance evaluations, “I appreciate that my board members evaluate me annually against the goals they set for me from the prior-year evaluation. It not only provides accountability for me, but it also ensures that I know from one month to the next that they have consensus on what I should be focused and no one board member can try to push their individual agenda. We have a standing closed session item each board meeting for Executive Director evaluation and we engage in fruitful and earnest conversations on my progress toward meeting the goals.”

- **Problem Solving Frameworks:** While it’s impossible to predict what problems will arise, many organizations proactively agree upon problem solving frameworks for general types of problems. For example, the board may agree upon a general procedure for personnel issues, including who will lead the effort, who will/will not be involved, when legal counsel will be involved, the specific steps that will be taken, etc.
- **Conflict Resolution Policies:** While every board would like to believe that it will never experience conflict amongst its own members, this is a real possibility for any group, especially a group of passionate professionals working in the tough climate of education. The board can proactively decide how it will handle such conflict. For example, the board may choose to call upon mediation skills of any of its members, or otherwise designate who can facilitate off-line discussions to lead to a resolution, and appropriately report back to the board. Conflict can be a reason for board turnover, but does not have to be. When handled the right way, differing opinions can lead to healthy debate and discussion. In general, the board should agree upon meeting “norms” that allow the group to respect each other’s time and opinions. Such “norms” may include active listening, pre-reading meeting materials, appreciating others’ point of view, etc.

(It should be noted that such conflict resolution policies are meant for inner-board conflicts only, and should remain separate from conflict of interest or uniform complaint policies.)

- **“What-if” Scenarios:** The board can put together specific plans for a variety of “what-if” scenarios. For example, the board can decide who will take over for various responsibilities in case a board member or school leader should suddenly stop performing his or her role for any reason.

Contingency planning is not meant to cast a grey cloud over an otherwise motivated board, or even to overtake an annual planning session. Rather, the board should set aside a limited amount of time to plan for the appropriate worst case scenarios, with the understanding that such time spent will likely save time and headaches at some point in the organization’s future.

Clearly, these are not the only strategies available to build an effective board. There is a plethora of resources and recommendations available for board governance, including the option to contract experienced consultants that offer assessments and recommendations for improvements to board practices. Boards can learn from these sources, from observing other boards’ practices, and – most importantly – from their own experiences. A regular cycle of goal setting, evaluation, and big-picture planning allows a board to consistently learn and grow, thereby becoming a stronger resource for the success of the school and the growth of its community. 