Board Meetings

Board meetings are meetings held by the policy makers and budget-setters of the school district to conduct the board’s business. They are not town hall meetings. They are not intended to be meetings where the board micromanages aspects of school operations better left to its managers and leadership team. Rather, they are meetings where a group of duly elected community representatives come together to provide thoughts, perspectives, guidance, leadership, and supervision on whether or not the school is operating within the guidelines established by policy, whether the budget is being spent wisely, and whether or not the superintendent is doing his or her job as the chief operating officer.

It is a lesser-known fact that board meetings are the only time that board members have legitimate leadership authority under many state statutes. When a quorum is held, as per the board’s bylaws or state law, the board can then act to conduct business. This is much different than the perception by some that board members, any time they wish, can show up in school buildings, park their vehicles where they wish, tell principals what to do, and show up in teachers’ classrooms to see what is going on. In those instances, board members are actually community members, just like anyone else, and if community members cannot do it, board members should not be doing it either.
We may assume that all board members know this, but realistically how could they? Part of our responsibility is to teach them what is appropriate. Outside consultants can be used to provide these lines of demarcation to the board as well.

We recall instances where seemingly “crazy” board members visited the buildings of some of our friends and tried to stir up trouble. One board member tried to get teachers to fill out a petition of “No Confidence for the Superintendent.” Another story we heard from a colleague concerned a board member showing up in the woodshop to use a tool for a home renovation project. Yet another board member we heard about loved to accompany the drug dogs through the lockers, not realizing that he really didn’t have the right to conduct a search.

The point here is that board of education meetings are the only real time that board members have actual authority, and they occur either once a month, twice a month, or quarterly in more rare instances. Therefore, board meetings are important in ensuring that the best decisions are made, that the best practices of discussion and deliberation are followed, and especially that every board member leaves the building feeling better than before he or she arrived.

You might have guessed it. The superintendent’s job is to ensure that each board member who walks out feels like a hero.

Here is what hero makers do to ensure that each board meeting goes better than the last one.

**Creature Comforts**

During board meetings, is the environment inviting? Are the parking lots plowed and the walks swept? Is someone cheerful (possibly a student) standing at the entrance of the administration
building or school to greet board members as they arrive? Do board members see pictures of themselves at the entranceway, almost as if they were present members of a country club or even better . . . past presidents? Does the place smell inviting?

If the meeting is held in a school, do board members see the custodians still mopping the hallways near where the board meets or if the garbage is still being emptied, bags sitting in the hallway? We hope not. If this is still going on, someone is probably not doing a good job, and that someone is the superintendent (because the principal is not doing his or hers). It is critical to have an impeccable, inviting walkway, from each board member’s vehicle all the way to the board member’s seat at the board table.

Is dinner prepared? Not necessarily one paid for by the school district, but a small, inviting dinner prepared by the superintendent or others willing to do it volantly? Homemade soups are a nice touch, as are hors d’oeuvres and finger foods. You don’t want something too sloppy, but something just enough to tide over board members if they have come directly from work and did not have time to stop for a bite to eat.

How about coffee and tea—decaf and regular? Small bottles of water are nice, or even a glass pitcher of water infused with cucumber, lemon, or orange.

Are board members seated in comfortable chairs, in a place where they are comfortable sitting? Do board members have nice nameplates in front of where they sit so that the public visiting can know who they are (but more importantly, so that each member can feel important by having a nameplate)? Does the arrangement of the board table and chairs allow for conversation? In other words, do the outside tables angle slightly inward, so that board members can communicate not only with each other but also with the public?

As a hero maker, your positioning is key. You want to be able to gauge the perceptions of each board member during the meeting from where you are sitting. It might be nice if you sit alongside the board president, so that you can whisper something in his or her ear if needed.

Is adequate space and positioning provided so that board members can stand up, sit down, and stand up again, and are
they able to refill beverages or appetizer plates without disrupting other board members or getting between the board and the public? Might be nice to allow board members a special grazing area that is comfortable to navigate.

Finally, do you have someone positioned and on-hand to tend to any needs board members might have? For example, there might be a need for an additional photocopy, for an extra pen or highlighter, for flip charts, or for someone to refill beverages.

If you do, it might go a long way in meeting their needs. Often, board members will leave a meeting not necessarily remembering everything that was said—but they will certainly remember if their needs were provided for, and how they felt.

Hero makers proactively tend to the setting, and ensure that the setting is optimal, including everything that is within eyesight or earshot from the time board members step out of their car to the time they step back in it.

Is the arrangement of which board members are seated next to one other, or not, cleverly conceived and designed? Have you ever been at a meeting where a small (we hope) faction or group of naysayers felt more comfortable because they had the emotional support of proximity? Although this may not be something you can quickly change, you can consider it as new members join or different officers are elected.

**Climate**

Hero-making superintendents are all about relationships of positive, unconditional regard at board meetings. Their tasks are done (paper shuffling), long before the board members arrive—even before the early ones arrive. Superintendents are not conferring
with the assistant superintendent in the office, nor are they whispering with the school attorney at the end of the hall. They are also not arriving alongside board members; they are greeting board members, just as principals should be greeting teachers or students in each school every day.

Superintendents are ensuring that someone is asking board members if we can take their coats or get them anything. Hero makers might want to do this themselves. Superintendents also must pay particular attention to whom, and how often, they speak with board members, because if they do not stay mindful of this, they might unintentionally spend more time with their favorites.

It is a good rule of thumb to give each board member at least one positive affirmation. It helps the board maintain the energy to stay in a policymaking role. After all, those who feel good about themselves where they are (in policymaking and governance), need not go somewhere else to have their needs met negatively (micromanaging).

Hero-making superintendents should find every opportunity to ensure that board members are comfortable. Hero-making superintendents are “great contextualizers,” offering confirmation of the value of board members’ contributions, even when the contribution is more butt-headed than it is breathtaking. As noted previously, hero makers are the segues between the points made, the transitions between the paragraphs, and the grease for the machine. The climate that hero makers provide is one where people feel safe sharing what is on their mind, because what is on their mind usually has some value, even if mis-delivered during distress. More on distress is covered later in the book.

Basically, hero makers ensure that they are all about relationships, first, since it is only through positive relationships that tasks can be accomplished effectively.
Getting Down to Business

Hero makers will not let board members waste each other’s time, nor that of the superintendent. Now you might think we’re going to launch into a cheerleading chant for Roberts Rules of Order,* but we are really not. Roberts Rules of Order provide some structure for meetings that run the risk of becoming a bit more cumbersome in detailed discussion, but to be honest, if you have idiots running the meeting—especially without a hero maker in the room—Roberts Rules will not do much, except to create a dysfunctional conversation where someone really nasty competes to prove that he or she knows Roberts Rules better than the rest.

Point of order!!!!!!
See what we mean?

Hero makers realize that the “how” of communication works much better than the “what.” We have found we can say just about anything to people (some things pretty far-reaching, indeed), when we are more mindful of the “how.” It is not so much the words, although certain phrases do help, such as “Would it please the board if the administration team . . . ?” It is much more the nonverbals that allow us to get the business done most effectively.

Structures help as well. One that we recommend when allowed is a consent agenda, where items of smaller import (and ones that can take up a lot of meaningless banter if there are no guardrails around) can be acted on with one motion. Some of these are items of business that occur month after month, such as approving minutes from the previous meeting, or accepting certain written committee reports that come in regularly, or authorizing various expenditures when allowable through this method. It is not uncommon to see ten or more agenda items collapsed into one consent agenda action.

The beauty of a consent agenda is that board members receive these agendas ahead of time for review, and if board members feel that items need to be moved from the consent agenda to a
regular agenda, they can make that request. It pays to share copies of all documents with board members ahead of time so that they can structure their thoughts and ready themselves for discussion. Paperwork should be well-organized and signposted, so that everything is in plain view for board members and easy to locate, and consistent in presentation from month-to-month.

Another tip for hero makers is to get a bit of business done—a healthy amount—before offering members of the community in attendance the time for input. Community input time is often when concerns are brought to the attention of the board, and this can be uncomfortable for board members (some love it, however). Either way, it runs the risk of taking people away from collaborative conversation, so anything you can do to maximize the number of productive conversations before a bit of contention enters the room is a good thing. That said, don’t wait until midnight to have your community input, as that is probably a bit unfair, it brings out the crazies, and it will upset the board member whose aggrieved constituency is in the room.

A good strategy is to offer appropriately timed forums for community input, where people get only a few minutes per person to talk, up until a certain point. The point here is to put right-sized guardrails around this time: enough so the community feels it has been heard, but not too much so that things run the risk of going too long and detracting from the business that must get done.

Also, it always pays to schedule those times when the board must go behind closed doors (“executive session” to discuss disciplinary incidents with students, personnel issues with staff, items of attorney/client privilege, contract negotiations, etc.), near the end of the meeting, so that people are not left uncomfortably stewing in some waiting room or hallway together, or even before the public part of the meeting convenes. One benefit of having the executive session prior to the meeting is that it has an ending time, because we don’t want to keep the public waiting. It can always reconvene later if needed.

The structure of board meetings, and how you conduct them, lends itself to good business practices and healthy discussions. Oh, and as we said at the beginning of this chapter—board meetings are meetings to conduct the business of the board. They’re not
town hall meetings, where anyone who has the ability to reproduce has the ability to filibuster.

That said, hero makers clarify to the public—and in full view of everyone—that although the board president may respond to their concerns, he or she may only thank them for their comments and contributions. Other board members are not obligated to respond to folks who are angry with them (although some will love the back-and-forth), and the board is not required to promise that solutions will come their way for grievances aired.

Hero makers, of course, will offer the assurances that folks are “heard,” and that the leadership and administration will do whatever it can to look into [this or that] for the board, and will offer the board president a report on what they find, as soon as it is doable.

Hero makers ensure that after the board meeting closes, board members will drive home with the feeling that the evening spent at school was well worth their time, talent, and contribution. They feel great about their leadership and are proud of what they said, and did, in the meeting.

They feel like heroes.

✶ Hero-making Tips

♦ Hero makers ensure that every single thing done at a board meeting is choreographed, to every extent possible, under their direction. Yet, at the same time, they do not give that impression to others.

♦ Hero makers spend the weeks prior to board meetings getting everything well-organized and disseminated to their boards. They encourage a relationship with their board so that if individual board members have concerns they wish to express, they inform the board president and superintendent prior to the meeting. The key to a good relationship is that no “surprises” occur during the meeting, even if disagreement is to take place or concerns are to be aired.
♦ Hero makers ensure that they use “invisible time” productively prior to each board meeting. This is when they are in the boardroom by themselves prior to anyone else’s arrival (except maybe their secretaries or the custodians), ensuring that the space is properly arranged, that seating is comfortable, that food and drink are available, and possibly even that soft music is playing so that no one arrives to an awkward silence.

♦ Hero makers are effective at making good recommendations for board action at board meetings. It helps to frame the issues constructively and gives board members the security to know that the actionable items have been vetted through the thinking process of the chief executive officer. It is a part of acting as a shield for board members. Board members are then welcome to move forward the recommendation through to board action, or to take a different path, but at least a professional recommendation is provided to the issues in front of them.

♦ Hero makers embrace their responsibility to make sure every word or action of their board is affirmed for its merit and contribution, even if it’s not the way things are going to move forward.

♦ Hero makers are great storytellers and do so at board meetings without droning on or going for too long. Their purpose in storytelling is to ensure that those offering contributions can look backward with pride, and forward with hope. They serve as the deft contextualizers so that everyone’s comment—even the thoughtless person’s—has a bit of window dressing for public consumption.

♦ Hero makers ensure that they bring the sizzle, as well as the steak, to board meetings. So, before the board takes up any issue or motion, the superintendent has one or two options that will work (or at least will minimize collateral damage) so that the board doesn’t appear to be out-of-options (and thus, appear to be unknowledgeable) in front of the public.
♦ Hero makers ensure that every good idea is someone else’s, especially a board member’s.
♦ Hero makers ensure that everything that goes right via board action is given to the board as credit, and everything that does not go right is embraced as the superintendent’s responsibility. This is actually a part of their role as The Shield. The buck stops with the hero maker.

Note

* Remember the book by Henry Robert Martin that streamlines the parliamentary procedure of meetings—with motion, seconds, discussions, etc.? That’s what we are referring to when we mentioned Roberts Rules of Order.
Between Board Meetings

How many of us have experienced the so-called big day, in whatever form it was, and then let our guard down for a few days (weeks or months) afterward? Examples might include the annual standardized testing window, the school accreditation visit, the final game of an athletic season, or even the final day of school in a given year.

“Whew!” We exhale.

Then, we take a much-needed rest.

Superintendents often feel this way after the big board meeting happening once or twice per month, and they especially feel it if they have working sessions between meetings, because these can be equally invigorating (taxing).

Hero makers know that only a brief exhale is wise.

For it is between board meetings that the seeds are sown for the most positive relations with board members. The hundreds of things that occur between board meetings make board members heroes, or not, and as such, they must become the focus of our savviest superintendents.
We suggest a three-pronged approach to ensure that heroes are made, and maintained, between board meetings for the best of results:

First, superintendents must make a personal commitment to reach out and do something for each board member between meetings, something that wouldn’t be in a superintendent’s contract or job description.

Second, superintendents must intentionally be seen by each board member’s constituency (key communicators) doing something that, in a positive manner, feeds the appetite (meets the needs) of each constituency.

Finally, superintendents must schedule some official, personal time with one board member per month, for a check-in and update on their perspective as to the superintendent’s connection with the community. This is typically over breakfast, lunch, or dinner—or at the coffee shop.

Let us talk about the first item, a personal commitment to reach out and do something for each board member beyond what is in your job description. It might be to write a thank-you note to the board member’s boss at work, who has provided the latitude for your board member to leave early once per month to attend the school board meetings. Noting their outstanding service, as any representative of their business would, is a nice touch. It could be to attend the funeral for a board member’s extended family member, to offer condolences. It could be to show up at a community event that the board member is helping organize, to offer a bit of volunteer time—Toys for Tots, Highway Clean-Up, or Fill-the-Bus for the Soldiers. It might be to see the board member and family out at the ice cream shop after the big game or spelling bee, and offer not only your congratulations but also your thanks to the family for allowing mom or dad to help you run the school. These actions help in hero-making. The point is that hero makers become intentional about knowing what is important to board members,
and what they are involved in, so that they specifically do something with unconditional positive regard that helps the board member to feel valued and important as a person.

The second is a bit more indirect, yet still intentional. Superintendents who know what board members value, know their constituencies. They also know where their constituencies spend their time. It is important that superintendents spend time there too, whether at the barbershop, the coffee shop, the private club, or the local delicatessen. Key in terms of hero-making is being seen having conversations with others, in a way that provides visible support and assistance for those causes that the constituencies champion.

If the conversation in the barber chair becomes one of voicing worry and support of the small business owner because of the impending arrival of the big-box, discount store, then it pays to have that conversation overheard. If it becomes one of praising the recent medical treatment and rehabilitation services at the local hospital’s preventative care outlet (and the board member is in human resources at the hospital), then that might be a good move as well. If it becomes one of sharing the telephone number of a local politician who can help the farmers get crop subsidies if the draught gets any worse this season, that might be well worth getting overheard too. The point is not that you are inauthentic or calculatingly chameleon-like; instead, you are finding areas in which you can authentically be seen as being helpful to board members’ constituencies when your values align, and then penciling-in opportunities to do just that.

The final point regarding the importance of between-board-meeting hero-making is to schedule a formal time, once a month, with one board member to have a candid conversation about how he or she perceives the school’s business is doing, as well as your ability to connect with the community. Then, remember what is said and work to address
any concerns the member might have. The school credit card should not pay for these meals, of course; it is sort of the equivalent of what we all used to do in terms of stocking our classrooms with the necessary supplies to teach—we use our own money. Same here. You’re investing by stocking your personal toolkit with knowledge that will help you lead—and hero-make. These meetings, no more than an hour or two of your time (at your board member’s convenience), will allow you to get at the heart of whether or not you are being a hero maker. If you find that you are connecting with the community after a “real” conversation, then we assure you that your board member is someone’s hero who is important to him or her.

If not, you have some more work to do.

One question we hear from time to time is this: I cannot even get my board member to talk to me, let alone go out for a meal with me. What am I to do? In this instance, either this person is just in need of a major chill pill, or the situation has deteriorated to a point where many more deposits will need to be made in the relationship, before any withdrawals in terms of communication or candor could be expected. We suggest you simply then choose someone in your school district whom you trust, or someone in the community close to that board member, to have the same type of conversation to garner input. If you follow through, word will get back to your board member of the overture, and your attentiveness.

The main point to remember here is that hero makers minimize the “exhale” that happens after the big meeting, and then consider each next day’s best work as directly proportional to the next meeting’s success.

If board members feel valued on a consistent basis, they are less likely to need the spotlight of a board meeting to feel important. By nurturing the relationships with board members and appropriately stroking egos between board meetings, you...
can diminish their needs to feel important when the lights are shining and the news reporters are taking notes at the next public meeting.

Never lose sight of the power of a well-placed compliment. Every time someone receives a compliment, he or she thinks the person giving it is just a little smarter. It needs to be sincere, but it can be quite specific.

We always need to look for the good things in others, even if we need to squint.

Never lose sight of the power of a well-placed compliment. Every time someone receives a compliment, he or she thinks the person giving it is just a little smarter.

**Hero-making Tips**

- Hero makers realize that what happens between board meetings is at times even more critical than what happens *at* board meetings. Each board member brings to each meeting the cumulative emotions that have been acquired since the last meeting, whether positive or negative. Hero makers are on a continual quest for emotion management.

- Hero makers realize that they can tell their board members what they stand for all they want, but this won’t do much good. Board members need to have hero makers *show* them what they stand for, and if this is through the whisper of someone to whom the board member is connected and respects, all the better.

- Hero makers remember that if board members resist their overtures to have conversations or spend time with them once or twice per year, they must be forgiven in advance because the refusal is indicative of a future teachable moment, when the hero maker can make a difference in this person’s life.