



Head-Board Communication

by Roger Weaver

My experience has led me to a strongly held belief that successful school heads, though they can have a variety of personal qualities and leadership styles, all have mastered “the communications thing.” The corollary is that among the too-frequent leadership failures in schools, communication is almost always prominent among the root causes.

For the Head of School, mastering and managing communication (it is useful to differentiate these) with all constituencies of the school, but first and foremost with the Board and the Board Chair, is Square One of building successful, sustainable leadership.

Head-Board communication (as opposed to Board-Head communication, a separate kettle of fish altogether) will not work effectively if it is unstructured, unmanaged and ad hoc. When communicating with the Board Chair and Board is something that the Head does “if time is available,” it is then almost inevitable that those crucial relationships will come to tears.

A common reason that Heads don’t communicate well with Board Chair and Board is that, either consciously or subconsciously, they don’t want to. This aversion can have all sorts of etiologies, but common among them are insecurity on the part of the Head, and insufficient clarity of role on the part of the Board. Each of these, of course, amplifies the other.

A school Head may be reluctant to communicate information about, say, a fender-bender involving the school bus for fear that he or she will somehow

be found wanting in leadership skill for allowing such a thing to happen. Additionally, if the Board has a habit of ignoring the critically important “separation of powers” between governance and administration, the Head may legitimately feel that relating anything about the fender-bender will have the result of multiple Board members then insisting on reviewing the bus driver’s credentials, compensation, and terms of employment, not to mention all the maintenance records on the bus.

Now, depending on the specifics of the incident and the nature of the Head-Board relationship, a fender bender with a school bus may or may not be a “reportable issue.” For the purposes of this discussion, let’s assume that we are talking about a K-6 school, the incident occurred on a 5th grade field trip when the school bus slowly backed into a light pole in the natural history museum parking lot, and two of the most volatile and reflexively over-involved trustees are fifth grade parents.

A Head who does not take the initiative to communicate with the Board (and the 5th grade parents) about this, and quickly, is throwing him- or herself under that dented bus. The 5th graders will promptly be reporting their version of the events at home. If the Head does not take control of the story and communicate the facts calmly, quickly and with assurances, then in no time there will be inflamed inquiries about the “school bus wreck,” and the 5th grade parent Board members will be organizing a “task force” to investigate the horrific school bus accident and safety in general at the school.

Here are some things a school head can do to improve mastery of Head-Board communications:

- The Board Advisory: the Head’s executive assistant sets up an email template and Board mailing list for Board Advisories. These are used regularly to communicate with the Board about things like the fender-bender with the bus, as well as good news.
- Build a genuine relationship with your Board Chair. This is what Frances Hesselbein, President of the Leader to Leader Institute (formerly The Drucker Foundation), calls “the indispensable partnership.” It takes time and effort and should be a priority. A face-to-face breakfast or lunch regularly scheduled and protected on the calendar is invaluable. This should occur at minimum monthly; more is better. Don’t ever cancel because there is “nothing important to talk about.” There is plenty to talk about.
- Schedule a regular weekly check-in phone call made by the Head to the Board Chair. These may sometimes be very brief; the essential thing is maintaining the opportunity for communication. That, in itself, communicates a big message.

Here are some things a Head can do to better manage Head-Board communication:

- Work with the Board Chair to develop a Board meeting about effective communication and appropriate roles. The Board Chair needs to deliver the message that communication from the Head (like the Board Advisory about the school bus fender-bender) is not an invitation to get involved in the issue or to pepper the Head with further questions. Additional questions from trustees, should they arise, should go to the Board Chair.

- Make operational Peter Drucker's definition of the Board Chair as the "hinge between the board and management." If the communication and relationship building mentioned above is authentic and effective, the Board Chair will move easily into this role. This reduces the Head's anxiety about the consequences of communication with the Board and thus promotes its appropriate use.
- State explicitly your interest in creating a healthy culture of communication between yourself and the Board. The Board Chair needs to reinforce that this kind of healthy communications culture is grounded in a clear understanding of the differences between governance and administration and the appropriate roles and purviews of each.

Creating a structure for communication is not difficult and it goes a long way to eliminating one of the worst things that a Board chair or Board can receive from the Head: surprises. A communications plan also has the very salutary effect of ensuring that communication actually does occur. As George Bernard Shaw observed, "The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place."¹ In part because of the pace, variability and intensity of the work, school Heads seem particularly vulnerable to this illusion.

¹ Preface to *The Doctor's Dilemma*, 1906.