

Governing More and Managing Less:

Imagine That!

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Over the years we have worked with hundreds of boards to help them define and clarify board roles. We typically begin with a question asking the board to identify its number one responsibility. Nine times out of 10, boards tell us that policy development is their primary job.

Now, be honest: does your board govern by policy? Sure, you approve a new policy or amend an old one now and then, but do you truly govern your district by making policy-level decisions, or do you spend most of your time dealing with operational issues? Test your answer: mentally reconstruct your last board meeting agenda. How many policy actions did you take?

Let's elevate the conversation even more: do you know any board—school board, hospital board, recreation board, church board, or any other—that actually governs by policy?

Although all boards define themselves as policy makers, they're not. Why not? What prevents boards from doing the job they know to be uniquely theirs? An unwillingness to deal with policy issues? Natural barriers? It may be that few boards have taken the time to analyze just what governing using policy really means.

Other boards may choose to operate at a sub-policy level because they believe policy to be "dull," or that operating at a policy level may remove them too much from the action. Neither belief is valid.

One of the most captivating and intriguing conceptual models for helping boards govern by policy is embodied in our model, Coherent Governance®. What is so special about Coherent Governance? What makes it better than the way most boards do business now?

For starters, the Coherent Governance principle says that boards develop only four kinds of policies:

1. Results: the results that are desired for whom and at what cost. In school districts, Results policies have to do with students and what they are expected to know and be able to do as a result of their education experience. Results policies require full involvement by the community as they are developed and refined. The board's job in defining Results policies is to assure that the value of end results expected to be achieved is at least equal to the resources consumed. That is the "swap" the district makes with the taxpayers.

2. Operational Expectations: the parameters within which the superintendent, the board's only direct employee, is expected to work. Anything beyond the boundaries stated by the board in policy can be done in pursuit of the board's Results. These are the operational standards imposed by the board, in policy, on the means the superintendent and his or her staff must observe as they work to make the Results happen. Think of them as the operational standards for the organization.

3. Board-CEO Relations: these policies describe the transfer of authority from the board to its CEO, and clarify the relationship between the two. Organizational performance is considered to be identical to CEO performance.

4. Governance Culture: how the board will operate internally and govern itself to add value to the district. These policies address nothing except the board's own operational culture, how it will conduct business and how members will conduct themselves and interact with each other. For many boards, this amounts to a cultural transformation. For others, it sets in policy the legacy they hope to leave for future boards.

The policy manual used by boards operating in a Coherent Governance environment typically is 45 or so pages in length, not the five-inch thick bulk that characterizes most traditional policy manuals. The majority of policies that now comprise board policy manuals are more operational in nature, and find a home in a companion administrative manual. Every board policy is monitored regularly, at least once each year. Clearly, state and Federal laws require boards to be responsible for certain actions. These requirements usually are dealt with as consent agenda items.

If we ask board members—as we have many times—why they ran for the board, almost invariably they sat that their motivation was to improve student achievement.

But when we analyze what boards spend their time doing, precious little time is spent dealing with “kid issues.” The focus on kids and their academic performance has been sacrificed in favor of fixing day-to-day operational problems, the actions and decisions boards hire and pay skilled administrators to make. As we have observed them, many board decisions simply ratify administrative actions or approve administrative recommendations about operational concerns. Very little leadership is exerted when boards limit themselves to such activity. In fact, such boards leave the best part of leadership unattended: assuring that the results of the education process are consistent with community expectations and that kids are successful.

Coherent Governance is a way to free boards from the mundane, operational roles many now perform. Coherent Governance structures boards to focus on the

Results, the kid-level concerns that members say they want to spend their time dealing with.

If the board directs its primary attention to student achievement issues, it must provide for itself time to do so. That means agendas must change. Board time no longer should be spent on such operational matters as bus routes, approving bills for payment, determining which applicant to hire for coach (or math teacher or secretary or principal), which copier to buy, or the color of brick for the new school.

It isn't that these decisions aren't important; they are. But the board doesn't have to make every important decision. The board needs to make every important *board* decision. It should expect and demand good administrative decisions to be made by administrators and good instructional decisions to be made by teachers and other educators. A growing number of school boards across America are realizing that there is more to leadership than dealing with the day-to-day operational matters that, after all, most lay board members are not expected to be experts about. Representing the community as an elected trustee requires more than that.

Superintendents and their staff deserve to be freed to do their jobs, but held fully accountable for results. The board provides leadership at its highest and best level when it bridges the span between the taxpayers and the professional staff by clearly defining the end results expected to be achieved, freeing staff to use their best creative ideas about how to make the desired end results reality, then monitoring progress to assure success.

That is what governing by policy is all about.

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