

Governing Teamwork vs. Micromanagement

That dreaded word – **micromanagement!** It sends cold shivers down a superintendent's spine. It confuses a board member who simply wants information to make educated decisions. It can cause mistrust and suspicion among the entire leadership team. But do we really know what it is, and what it isn't?

Preventing micromanagement means engaging boards in discussions that identify the questions to be asked about the district's future.

There is a style of management with which many are familiar and which has acquired the name 'micromanagement'. The manager, or board, in question acts as if the subordinate, or superintendent, is incapable of doing the job, giving close instruction and checking everything the person does. They seldom praise and often criticize. Whatever their subordinate, or superintendent does, nothing seems good enough. It is the **opposite of leadership**.

Micromanagement can happen for a number of reasons. Board members may be simply trying to solve problems for constituents or other board members, on their own or as a group. They may be trying to influence major management decisions. Sometimes members may be driven by their own personal agenda, but more often than not, members get involved in management issues because they, in their well-intentions, believe their intervention is necessary for the good of the district. Well-intentioned or not, micromanagement needs to be nipped in the bud, otherwise it undermines the position of the superintendent and leaves the board's role of governing leaderless.

The board's key governing areas are planning, monitoring, and maintaining relationships with the community. For all other work, the board and superintendent need to agree on each other's roles and develop policies with clearly defined operations to handle issues and situations. When micromanagement happens, it is usually a symptom of a problem. These problems often occur because:

- the board does not have a clear understanding of its role in the district nor a system to help guide its work in that role;
- the board has no policies or procedures delineating appropriate board- staff roles and responses;
- the board members have no experience in "leading"; they are more accustomed to "doing";
- the board is in the middle of, or has just finished handling, a crisis during which it needed to take on management roles; and
- the board fears the district will fail and has concerns about how the district is being operated.¹

The first step for a board to take to keep from sliding down the slippery slope of micromanagement is to recognize its job is not to run the school district. It is to represent the "owners," the community, and

¹ Hildy Gottlieb, "Why Boards Micro-manage and How to Get Them to Stop", *American School Board Journal* (2009)

lead the school district to the future the community desires. Board members are here to think strategically, recognize new trends or emerging threats and to set direction to guide the district into a successful future.

What can boards do to safeguard themselves?

Stop Thinking Small

- ❖ Instead of wading through reports filled with details, ask for executive summaries and data that is related to the district's goals.
- ❖ Determine key financial and operational indicators that will best describe the status of the district and its progress toward success.
- ❖ Empower committees to "dive deep," get answers to questions, and provide reports to the board summarizing their findings and work.

How to Start Thinking Big

- ❖ Create a strategic framework that is clear and detailed which provides the outcomes of a board's governing work.
- ❖ Engage in strategic planning by identifying strategic issues and strategic actions to address issues.
- ❖ Allow standing committees to act as the board's "governing engines" providing a stronger foundation of information and analysis for full board decision-making focused on "big-ticket" issues.
- ❖ Set board performance standards and conduct board performance accountability.²

When school board members understand they, and only they, can lead their district into the future they are able to focus on their real work. When boards fully embrace their roles, engage in governance work, side by side with their superintendent who informs them of district operations and outcomes, and fill their agenda with actions and decisions focused on accomplishing the district goals, they transform into high performance boards.

² "Bring Out the Best in Your Board"; White Paper; Blackbaud: Doug Eadie, "Becoming a Champion for Change", *American School Board Journal*: R. Betz and D. Eadie, "Five keys to high-impact governing: unlock secrets to meaningful governance", *American School Board Journal*