

## Leading, Following, and the Wisdom to Know the Difference

BOARD LEADERSHIP, NUMBER 36, MAR.-APR. 1998

THIS ARTICLE IS INSPIRED BY a board member's recent question during a seminar. A bit wary that I was recommending a "board-as-poll-taker" approach, he asked, "Does the board just listen to what owners want, then vote to have it done?" My zeal in underscoring the importance of boards listening to the ownership had mistakenly painted for him a picture in which the board is merely a slave to surveys.

His watchful sensitivity pinpointed a topic of great difficulty, perhaps the toughest quandary in the exercise of board judgment. The dilemma is this: The board represents some base of legitimacy outside itself (in Policy Governance, this reference group is referred to simply as the ownership) and must, therefore, speak on its behalf. To do that, the board must have a clear understanding of what owners want. However, the board is obligated to focus on and learn about the topic at hand in order to be, in effect, the ownership's policy experts on the matter. Surely, for example, the ownership of a school board—the general public—has a right to expect the board to know far more than the average citizen about the future of, challenges to, and possibilities in education.

Can a board—as my questioner feared I was advocating—simply do what owners want done, even though board members have more insight and experience about the board's subject matter than do most owners? Is the board not obligated to *lead*, rather than just to follow the polls? Yet leading by forging ahead, by ignoring or omitting

### ← FAQ

How does a board member deal with constituency expectations?

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input, will be criticized as being out of touch or elitist. Every legislator and board member faces this lead-follow uncertainty.

I do not to know how to make this dilemma easy to resolve, but in this article

I recommend a way to think about it. The board's path to wisdom is to listen, to learn, and to judge.

### Attentive Listening

Since the board's job is founded in its owner-representative role, awareness of owners' wishes, values, and opinions is of paramount importance. No amount of input from staff, other providers, or even of current consumers can substitute for the relationship between, as it were, principal and agent. (For an extensive discussion of distinguishing owners from other groups, see the first four articles in this chapter.) This phase of board leadership may not look like leading, but without it subsequent leading is robbed of authenticity.

#### FAQ →

How can the board practice active listening?

So how does a board listen to the ownership? A board needs a strategy for listening, partly because owners are not ordinarily knocking down the doors to be heard. Some owners don't even know they are owners. For example, I know some organizations in my own community (school, city, hospital authority, community college) that could legitimately consider me part of their

ownership, but I am undoubtedly unaware of most of them. Another reason strategy is needed is that nonowner groups that can be confused with ownership are crowding in to be heard. The most likely such groups are staff, current consumers (or more likely, subgroups of consumers), funders, and sometimes vendors. Owners, who may be amorphous and aren't usually angry at the moment, can easily be left out.

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For example, city councils should arrange to hear from citizens about what they find various levels of city benefits worth in taxation. That differs from the widespread practice of listening to disgruntled city customers about potholes or stop sign placement. Association boards should schedule focus groups with members to see

how much potential association benefits are worth in dues. These meetings are not, by the way, meant as evaluation of current operations but as wisdom-building for the council or board as it considers the ends (results, recipients, and worth of those

results) of the future. And while such listening will do wonders for a board's image, these arrangements are not for public relations. The purpose of these meetings is for boards to listen, not to talk or explain themselves.

These are just examples. Such listening can take many forms. Focus groups, surveys, town meetings, and other mechanisms should all be tried, as appropriate. The listening phase tends to make board members more like the owners. If it is good to construe boards as servant-leaders, as I believe, the servant mode dominates in the act of listening.

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### Studious Learning

Good listening will acquaint a board with what owners know. But owners do not know enough to govern. That is why a board exists to begin with. Owners have a right to demand that their representatives listen to them, but just as surely they are entitled to representatives who know more than they do. So this phase of leadership consists of board members searching out special knowledge relevant to their task—scholarship and erudition are the aim. The board might say, as a legislator once did, that it votes the way its owners would vote if they knew what it does. This phase tends to make board members *unlike* the owners.

Boards must learn what is necessary to govern, not to manage. While that understanding includes a sense of what dangers to avoid (in order to establish wise policies of executive limitations), the toughest knowledge to be acquired is that which prepares the board for the judicious choice of ends.

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What prepares a board to make ends choices? One obvious necessity is knowledge about the variety and extent of human needs. The board needs to know the current state as well as what the situation will likely become in the absence of its organization. Another useful understanding comes from exposure to differing, even radical, points of view about the nature and causation of relevant aspects of the human condition. A third type of learning is knowledge of what others have been able to accomplish and at what cost (the equivalent of *industry averages* in business). Notice that none of the necessary knowledge is about how to run programs or design services. The proper learning is not so much about the organization being governed but about the world in which the organization is an instrument.

**FAQ →**

What does the board need to know about an organization in order to govern it effectively?

The only exception to this external focus is this: The board needs to know what is more and less possible with the organization it has today. That is, the board will need to know something about its “instrument” in order to choose intelligently among possible ends. But this knowledge is about its capabilities and incapacities rather than its operational workings per se. For example, if a board considers focusing its organization on needs of children rather than adults, it is important to know that the

organization currently has no expertise about children, though it is not important for the board to know how to run programs for children. Choosing to reorient the organization toward children can still be done, but this choice carries a higher initial cost as the organization regears.

Therefore, a community action agency board would become proficient in the nature and causes of poverty. A school board would become expert in the skills and understandings needed for thriving in a world several decades hence. A trade association board would be knowledgeable about the threats and opportunities its trade is likely to encounter a number of years out.

## Sound Judgment

**FAQ →**

What are some criteria for choosing board members?

Listening conscientiously to the ownership and becoming absolutely erudite about the applicable topics will still not lead to wise governance unless the third element can be added. After all, board members are—or should be—chosen for discernment, probity, common sense, perspicacity, and discretion. In short, the board, with its grasp of ownership values and concerns and its understanding of a body of knowledge, must then apply its good judgment.

As much as the exercise of good judgment is a personal quality gained from years of experience and competence-building, it is also the product of care and procedure. A board can affect the process by which it transforms individual judgment into group judgment. The board needs an approach to decision making that guarantees that all facets of an argument are heard. Because the compelling power of group-think can overwhelm almost anything in its path, an ironclad rule of procedure can help. For example, does the board require that even points of view not represented at the table be given a voice? Because the board cannot be large enough to include all diversity present in the ownership, even successfully encouraging all board members to speak up is not enough. Board members can be selected to argue for points of view not their own or, better still, outside spokespersons for unpopular views can be included in board debate.

Moreover, the board can institutionalize the questioning of its own positions. Has it heard from the bold, the radical, the unthinkable—whatever opinion challenges the wisdom of the day? Is the board being too safe, too restrained on one hand, or, on the other hand, too bold or unrealistic? Are the ends under consideration too ambitious or not far-reaching enough? What vested interests in this decision must the board take into account? Boards should ask themselves this: If some organization, sometime, will blaze the trail to a breakthrough, why will it not be us?

Some boards might institutionalize these and other questions in their process. Some might work best by using a modified adversarial system with teams of board members arrayed against each other. Other boards will find that a cooperative, team-of-the-whole approach might, in the popular skunk-works fashion, energize the audacious thinking that allows ordinary people to do the extraordinary.

A board should strive for a wisdom that is not driven by safety or ordinariness, even though it is planted firmly in reality. Boards without a meaningful connection to their legitimacy base (the ownership) or without a masterful grasp of realities (the knowledge) will not have the grounding to pull this kind of leadership off even if they have the basic ability and the inclination. For, while creative board leadership might often appear unbridled and free, it should not be merely the enthusiastic sharing of ignorance. However, a degree of informed dreaming is necessary. Indeed, true leadership demands that a board abandon its role as overseer of operations. It must embrace a new role—that of the think tank that creatively and vigorously drives and informs policy, creating a dynamism of its own.

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