Board Chairs

The Top 10 Tips for Being a Great Board Chair

1. Take on this role knowing that it is hard.

Being a board chair is intellectually challenging, takes a lot of time, and requires strategic thinking. It also has huge benefits in terms of personal and external impact. Be ready to play the role well.

2. Get to know your fellow board members well.

Leading a board is about managing a team. Learn your individual board members' skillsets, personalities, and optimal working conditions. Find how to bring out the best in your colleagues so you may leverage their leadership most effectively. Share your own working style, expectations, and commitment to the team's success.

3. Spread the work.

Remember, you have a full board of amazing leaders to rely on. Just because you are the one who is speaking with the school leader each week and the most immersed in the work of the board doesn't mean you should do all the board's work yourself. In fact, board effectiveness decreases when all board members are not fully engaged in the work. Maximize your team.

4. Strategically assign members to committees.

Do not just ask board members which committees they want to serve on and call it a day. Be thoughtful about who you ask to serve on each committee. Keep board member committee preferences in mind, but build the committee structure in ways that maximize individual talents. As the board's leader, use your observations of individuals' strengths and the committees' needs to make the most advantageous appointments. If a board member absolutely does *not* want to be on or chair a particular committee, listen to that; you don't want a disengaged committee member.

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> **"Just because you are the one who is talking with the school leader each week and the most immersed in the work of the board doesn't mean you need to do it all yourself."** Simmons Lettre

5. Make sure each board member is engaged and hold them accountable.

Engagement begins with individual board members having key roles to play in the board achieving its goals. For example, if a great real estate attorney just joined your board as a finance committee member, be explicit with the role you need her to play in securing the new school building. People do their best work and feel most invested when they have clear direction and expectations.

Check in regularly with committee chairs and members to ensure all board members are delivering on their commitments. When assigned commitments are not met, have conversations with these members to identify barriers and solutions for moving forward. If members are unable to fulfill their role, then the board chair must take leadership in addressing this problem.

6. Don't overreact.

Unexpected things happen all of the time in schools. Consider all points of view and options before you jump to conclusions. Make sure you always take the time to see the full picture.

7. Be a great facilitator.

Your big job is to manage the board's dialogue. Make sure all board members are heard, and no one person dominates the collection of voices around the table. In facilitating meetings, if a board member hasn't commented, thoughtfully engage them in voicing their opinion. Ideally, all board members speak at least once during each meeting. Don't let the conversation veer off the agenda or drag on beyond the allotted time.

8. Get into the school and bring other board members with you.

Model the importance of visiting the school outside of board meetings. Go to plays, portfolio presentations, community meetings, and back-to-school night. Board members must know the school, families, and the students they serve—and that is hard to do if they never actually interact with them. Remember, when visiting the school you are always representing the board. Be careful not to overstep that role.

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9. Value your regular check-ins with the school leader.

Make sure you are giving ongoing feedback and support. You will end up knowing more about the day-to-day happenings in the school than your board colleagues—take time to update them on important events (i.e., compliance citations) before or at the next board meeting.

Start the check-in with something positive, perhaps asking the school leader to tell you something great that happened at school this week. Ask what problems at the school worry your school leader most. Also, always ask the school leader how he/she is doing as an individual—this is a job with high burn out. Make sure you are sending the message to the school leader that you care about him or her as a professional and as an individual.

10. Know that retreats are critical.

Boards need time away from the regular work. Retreats help the board focus on long-term strategy, encourage innovation and group motivation, and strengthen relationships that improve team effectiveness. As chair, make sure that the retreats not only happen, but also are effective.

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