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WHEN THE BOARD BECOMES THE PROBLEM

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A particularly dangerous moment arrives when a normally supportive board member(s) with power, charisma, and sometimes resources, breaks from the general board consensus about a key issue and goes off track. That individual now may begin to work with a vocal minority of disgruntled parents, alumni and/or staff to undercut the Board and often attack the head.

What if that individual, even though bound by a statement of confidentiality (which should be signed EVERY year by every board member) decides to leak that confidential information to this newly formed group of disgruntled parents? These parents may form a Facebook page and send a petition to the board asking for specific actions to be taken and/or a town meeting to be held.

Suddenly, the parents, even in the vast majority of schools with self-perpetuating boards, become a force that is now attacking the very foundations of healthy board governance. Perhaps they do not like the new head; or a policy or trend undertaken by a mid to long term head; or a specific decision made by the board or administration around tuition, traffic or the schedule. Almost any topic could explode suddenly into a major cause célèbre. Now a board member who has inside knowledge is leading the parents.

What should the first course of action be? The Head needs to establish a “listening plan,” i.e., meeting with parents by grade level and preferably in parent homes rather than at School. The meetings should be limited to one grade level at a time and the division head, and a few teachers and board members with children in that grade should also attend. These meetings could be sponsored by the parents’ association (unless that organization has been

“compromised”) and held from about 7:30 to 9:00 pm. After initial comments by the head, division head and teachers about school issues in general, the period from 8:00 to 9:00pm should be for open-ended questions with only one proviso: no individual person including staff may be criticized. If the parent home is small, all the better. It is fine if people sit on the floor/carpet. This creates an informal atmosphere.

Such meetings can allow for legitimate parent concerns to be expressed in a “safer” setting than at school and in numbers that can provide for a reasonable dialogue and conversation. For new heads the meetings provide an opportunity to gain a read on the parent body and to build some rapport



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with parents while also aiding in learning at least their first names.

Proactive measures should prevent destructive and disgruntled forces from rising up in the first place. Active listening by the head and perhaps indirectly the board can help ensure that legitimate parent or staff concerns are heard. Periodic parent opinion surveys may be useful as a proactive management tool BUT only with these ground rules:

1. The survey is led by a firm with NO affiliation with the School or Board or parent body.
2. The survey is conducted in the fall and NEVER during a time of active disgruntlement.
3. The survey ratings are published for parents within six weeks after concluding the survey.
4. The “raw” comments are never seen by anyone except for the chair and head of school.

In our work with schools whether on governance or strategic planning, on faculty compensation/evaluation or school climate issues, the theme of “communication” is always raised. This can be an easy catchall term for every problem imaginable. Obtaining some real clarity and focus on communication strategies is essential but boards and heads need to learn never to overreact. Rumor mongering, gossip and back channel communications can often end up with the leadership responding inappropriately or too quickly to a perceived crisis. Determining whether there is a “crisis” or just a rumor or a need for clarity is the first step.

We published an article some years ago based on a keynote speech we gave at the ECIS conference in Dubrovnik. The article is on our website: “Patterns of Board Behavior You Do NOT Want to Emulate.” That article may bear rereading before boards succumb to reactive behavior or to the threats of a current or former rogue board member.