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A Governance Perspective Article: The "Tone from the Top"

by Dr. Brad Saron, Ed.D.
Superintendent, Sun Prairie Area School District

Sources: Kouzes and Pozner: Model the Way

Core Thesis: The most significant way a Board can affect organizational change is through reflective work in becoming the best Board it can be, as opposed to the customary reaction to the need for system improvement, which is to double down on accountability and to govern through increased expectations.

What If Organizational Reform Began with Board Excellence?

The significant impact of divisive topics, isolated perspectives, and viral social media stories have negatively impacted the effectiveness of School Boards across Wisconsin and the United States, and this asphyxiating blast discord has governance leaders off their equilibrium, looking for solid ground from which to govern. With the larger public internalizing a culture of outrage, and with our school governance leaders off balance, many systems are now vulnerable and susceptible to organizational instability. To add to this, as school systems recover from the negative effects of pandemic, the need to illustrate performance improvement to the organization's owners is adding stress at the Board table and to the Board/Superintendent relationship.

Regardless of the politics and viral media, funding issues and pandemic instability, for School Districts, students came to school for the beginning of this school year. Course schedules had to be fulfilled, educators needed to be hired, and buses needed to run on time. Given the urgency of need our students face and what they deserve from our schools, and given the instability of many School Boards, where do we go from here? What is a logical first step? Should the starting point be at Ends Policy refinement? Or should it be with monitoring progress and accountability? We'd like to advance a theory of action to postulate: Start with Board or, in our case, School Board effectiveness.

The idea of beginning a journey of continuous improvement by first reflecting on one's own performance is not new to leadership as a discipline. In his groundbreaking work on servant leadership, Robert Greenleaf writes much about leaders "going first" in his groundbreaking work on Servant Leadership. Stephen Covey's first three habits are about self-improvement and reflection. Leadership authors Jim Kouzes and Barry Pozner have grounded much of their "Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership" model within the first tenant of "Model the Way." The notion of formulating standards of excellence and being the first to set the standard of "living out" a commitment to them is often ingrained in leadership methodology, but rarely has it been applied to Boardroom work and the positive effect Board leadership can have on the institution over which it governs. Consider this: How many instances of system reform begin with a Board commitment to leadership in governance? More often, system reform begins with the Board engaging in a leadership search, in dialogue about holding administrators more accountable, and in grandstanding to special interest groups that may not have the complete story of careholder expectations. But the real work starts by looking in the mirror.

Of course, it is not just Board members, who more frequently than not, point externally to problems or areas that need improvement versus focusing inwardly. Many human beings, especially in Western cultures, tend to look for fault elsewhere, with a lack of self-awareness, to find opportunities to improve internally, either with themselves or the Board. We have found five characteristics that Boards have and/or develop to lead by example in improving their own effectiveness:

- Vulnerability
- A mindset of continuous improvement
- Aptitude for feedback
- Humility
- A focus on their role and what they can control

Author Brené Brown has shown the world the importance of vulnerability with her bestselling books. She defines vulnerability as uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure. As Boards focus on themselves, the feelings of uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure are probable and are also likely why Boards, and many humans, resist their own internal work. Of course being vulnerable, and showing the careholdership (ownership) that vulnerability, only makes the Board stronger. Vulnerability is not a weakness but a strength that Boards should lean into.

Boards expect that the organization they govern continually improves. No organization can stay stagnant and expect to thrive or survive. But do Boards share that same mindset for their own performance? Effective Boards have an expectation that the organization they serve evolves and focuses on growth as well as their own Board. It is important to note that all Board members have a responsibility for the continuous improvement mindset, not just the Board chair.

Feedback is critical for growth and success, both for humans and for organizations. The importance of establishing a culture of providing and receiving feedback cannot be overstated. It is our experience that Boards are much better at giving feedback than receiving it, especially in complex times. Many Boards do not even provide an opportunity for careholders to provide substantive feedback. Finding ways for careheolders and staff to provide feedback and for Board members to to provide feedback to each other is important. Being the example will also show the organization the importance of feedback for organizational excellence.

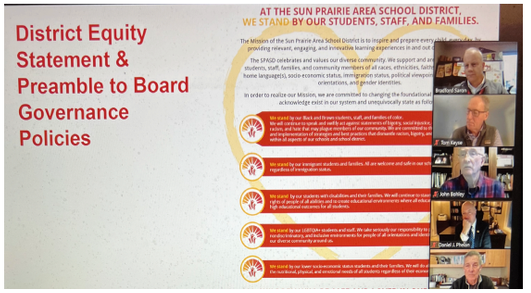
Robert Greenleaf and Jim Collins are just two of the many leadership authors who write about the importance, power, and effectiveness of humble leaders. Humble Board members understand that they have a lot to learn and are open to that learning. They listen intently and try to see issues from others' perspectives. Humility is often overlooked, but it is an essential component of effective leadership and governance.

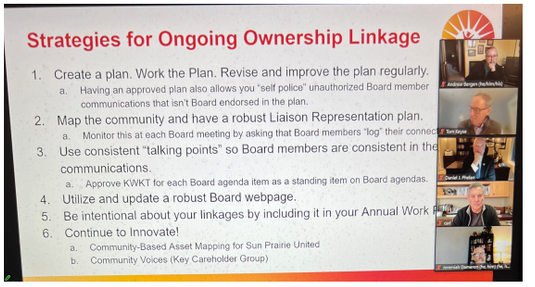
As mentioned, it is easy for Boards to focus on matters within an organization and not even be cognizant of potential issues within the Board itself. Boards that are effective and reflective are vulnerable, have a continuous improvement mindset, are open to receiving and providing feedback, and are humble. They focus on self-improvement before trying to tackle organizational matters. They understand their governing role within the organization and work just as hard to monitor and improve their own effectiveness than that of the organization they serve.

Without question, Boards need to hold systems accountable for results they proactively define. What we advance here is that the first step in system accountability is Board accountability. And, through first focusing efforts on excellence in governance, the Board can "Model the Way" of continuous improvement for the organization. And in doing so, its members will have the credibility within the organization to expect great things to happen.

GOVERN for IMPACT GSP FELLOW LEARNING EVENT - JAN 24, 2023

On Tuesday, January 24, 2023 Governance Systems Professionals, Karen Fryday-Field, Senior Consultant at Meridian Edge Leadership & Governance Consulting, Rose Mercier, Senior Consultant at The Governance Coach, Brad Saron, Superintendent and Steve Schroeder, Board Chair at Sun Prairie Area School District lead a learning and sharing event specifically for other GSP Fellows on Translating Ownership/Careholdership Input into...Board Directed Ends (Critical Outcomes) ... For Real.





Just the Facts:

- 21 of 40 GSP Fellows participated
- 100% of the GSP Fellow participants strongly agreed/agreed that the event offered valuable information that enhanced their knowledge/insight on the subject.
- 54% survey respondents learned at least 2-4 key concepts and 38% at least 1 concept.
- 100% survey respondents indicated they would recommend the learning event to others.

HOLD THE DATE FOR THE NEXT GSP FELLOW EVENT: WEDNESDAY, JUNE 15, 2023

GOVERN for IMPACT TOWN HALL - JAN 31, 2023

Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Justice - Practical Governance Steps, Tools, and Policies that Boards of Directors Can Engage in to Make an Appropriate Difference (Part III)

On Tuesday, January 31, 2023 GOVERN for IMPACT hosted the third session in a series of exploratory conversations regarding Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Justice.

- Part I - The Board's Role/Responsibility in Influencing Organizational Response to Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Social Justice (Sep. 2021)
- Part II - Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Justice - Why is This the Board's Business... and the role of the Board
- Part III - Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Justice - Practical Governance Steps, Tools, and Policies that Boards of Directors Can Engage in to Make an Appropriate Difference

This third session in the series addressed:

- Is Your Board Recognizing the Challenge of Leading in EDIJ Matters?
- Is your Board compelled to address this local and worldwide challenge through appropriate policy and action? - Discussion
- What kind of dialogue has your Board had regarding leading in this area?

Amazing resources were shared including:

- A Practical Framework of Eight Board Actions
- Two Policy Examples

and many other useful materials

Just the Facts:

- 53 people participated
- Results are still coming in and at present, 71.4% of the participants strongly agreed/agreed that the event offered valuable information that enhanced their knowledge/insight on the subject.
- 64.3% survey respondents learned at least 2-4 key concepts and 14.3% greater than 5 concepts, and 21.4% at least 1 concept.
- 78.6% survey respondents indicated they would recommend the learning event to others.

Thank You to Our 2022 Donors by the GOVERN Resource Development Team (RDT)

Your generosity continues to affirm our bold move to become a donor supported philanthropic organization. Our mission together to make the world a better place through governance excellence is best accomplished with an ever-growing and enthusiastic community. You are that community! Over $2,100 came in through the final two months of 2022. Our Board of Directors led the way as every member made a contribution. Thank you! We look forward to growing our community further in 2023 and invite you to continue generously supporting a better world through governance excellence! Thank you to all those donors who gave in 2022!

GOVERN Board Members

- Pat McCarver
- Ray Tooley
- Elaine Vandale
- Harry Nijkamp
- Chuck Namit
- Chantal Ouellette
- Lindsay Grillet

Leadership Team Members

- Karen Fryday-Field
- Rose Mercier
- Kathy Wiener
- Tim Kurth
- Richard Stringham
- John Bohley
- Tom Keyse
- Jeremiah Dameron

Sponsors and Partners

- Jannice Moore, The Governance Coach
- Karen Fryday-Field, Meridian Edge Leadership & Governance Consulting
- An anonymous Foundation

GOVERN Community Members

- Carl LaBarbera
- Bill Charney
- James Amador
- Barbara Sprintger

Community Members (con't)

- Charity Beland
- Gerald Harburg
- Michelle Davis
- Gary Chizmadia

Community Members (con't)

- Hartger Wassink
- Dan Phelan
- Steve Schroeder

BREAKING NEWS

2023 CONFERENCE
GOVERN FOR IMPACT
JUNE 15-17
RE-IMAGINING GOVERNANCE SYSTEMS
-BIG IDEAS ON THE GROUND-

GOVERN FOR IMPACT announces 2023 annual conference is set to be an in-person event in Glen Allen (Richmond), Virginia

June 15 - 17, 2023

Virginia Crossings Hotel and Conference Center

IMPORTANT DETAILS

Frequent Additions to Our Program Schedule!

New Faculty Being Added Regularly!

Conference Registration is Now Open!

CLICK HERE TO SEE THE DEVELOPING SCHEDULE

PLEASE CLICK HERE TO SEE THE EVOLVING FACULTY TEAM

PLEASE CLICK HERE TO REGISTER

Share the Conference Opportunity...We have a Special Offer for You!!

Be refunded 25% on your registration fee! It's easy!

Here's how:

As a conference participant, if you refer a new attendee (i.e. not a current GOVERN affiliate or previous conference attendee) who then registers (and doesn't cancel) for the Conference you will be refunded 25% of your registration fee.

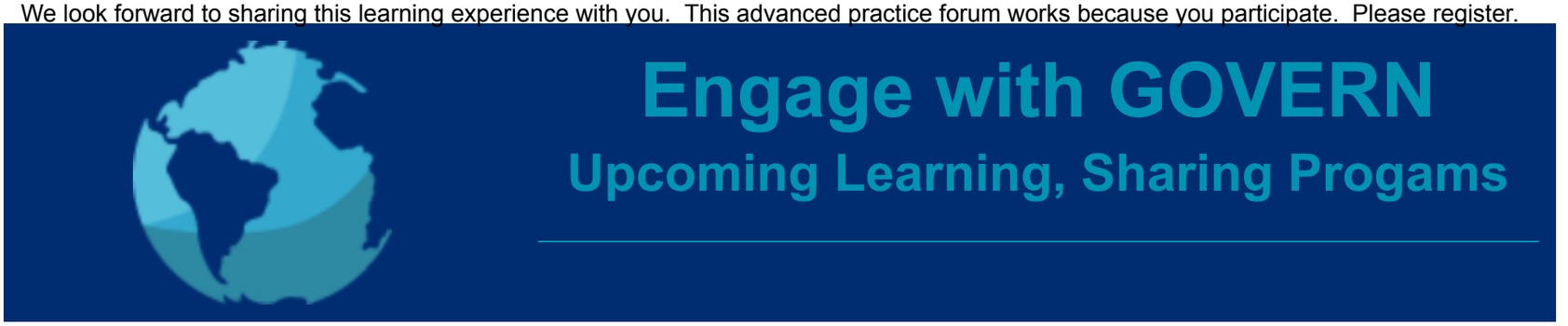
FORUM THEME: UNDERSTANDING OUR HUMAN SIDE AND VALUES TO BUILD A STRONGER VISION FOR IMPACTFUL GOVERNANCE

This forum is designed to build your conceptual knowledge as well as your applied experience and self-awareness. It is a virtual one-day forum this year which will provide an opportunity to connect the best minds in Board governance. We convene to share knowledge, learn from experts, build on experiences, build effective applications, and improve impact of governance and hence organizations.

We need you at this table. Key learning conversations require keen learners. We have shortened the forum to one day this year, given people's "online fatigue".

This learning forum will prove to not only build knowledge, skills, and wisdom, but it will also prove to build insights and resilience with participants. At GOVERN we are equipping innovative Boards, Board Members, Board Chairs, Board Administrators, Consultants, Academics, and all interested to impactfully shape the future through excellence in governance. We are inspired by the Policy GovernanceÒ system of governance and are interested in education, research, and advocacy in the field of governance.

We look forward to sharing this learning experience with you. This advanced practice forum works because you participate. Please register.



Municipal Government and Agencies Learning Community Inaugural Meeting
February 8, 2023 from 4:00-5:00 pm EST

GOVERN for IMPACT is very pleased to hold this complimentary special learning community for leaders in the municipal government and government agencies sector. The focus of this learning community is on practitioners sharing expertise on excellence in Board/organizational governance.

Please be sure to register if you wish to attend this inaugural session. (There are no fees to join this group). To register click the Register Here button.

PLEASE REGISTER HERE

Face-to-Face Advanced Practice Forum Event (Virtual)
Saturday, March 4, 2023 from 9:30-4:45 pm EST

This forum is designed to build your conceptual knowledge as well as your applied experience and self-awareness. It is a virtual one day forum that will provide an opportunity to connect the best minds in Board governance.

PLEASE REGISTER HERE

Real World Board Room Dilemmas of Now and the Future
April 4, 2023 from 11:30-1:30 pm EST

PLEASE REGISTER HERE

Introduction to Policy Governance System: The Dynamic Fundamentals
Preconference Course
June 15, 2023 PreConference

Advance Practice Course: Changing the World Through Impact - Organizational Strategic Directions and Impact: From the Board's Big Ideas to Real Organization Results on the Ground
Preconference Course
June 15, 2023 Preconference

PLEASE

PLEASE REGISTER HERE

Annual Conference (1 day Preconference and 2 day Conference) Event
Re-imagining Governance Systems - Big Ideas on the Ground
June 15, 16 & 17, 2023 Main Conference

PLEASE REGISTER HERE

Town Hall
September 2023 - More details to come in future GOVERN Updates and Eblasts

Stay Tuned for More Information

Advanced Practice Webinar
October 2023 - More details to come in future GOVERN Updates and Eblasts

Stay Tuned for More Information

Advanced Practice Webinar
December 2023 - More details to come in future GOVERN Updates and Eblasts

Stay Tuned for More Information

Policy Governance Professional Program
Runs from October 2023 to May 2024. Nine instructional webinars from 11:00-1:00 pm ET along with an average of 8-12 hours a week in reading, completing assignments and quizzes, individual or small group sessions with the Unit instructor and personal study time.

REGISTER

GOVERN can only succeed when we work together and share ideas on how to bring more governance excellence to our world. As an affiliate, you champion our common cause to make our collective work possible. A very special shout out and thank you to all the GOVERN for IMPACT affiliates who joined or renewed their commitment through an affiliateship in 2022!

The following Fellows, Governance System Professionals (GSPs) renewed in 2022*:

- Klaren Alexander
- Sam Barfell
- Andrew Bergen
- John Bohley
- Laurel Corbiere
- Anne Dalton
- Mark Fewer
- Cindy Fletcher
- Jennifer Flynn
- Karen Fryday-Field
- Thomas Hinkley
- Ted Humphrey
- Thane Joyal
- Thomas Keyse
- Tim Kurth
- Carl LaBarbera
- Reid Lehman
- Patricia McCarver
- Rose Mercier
- Jannice Moore
- Chuck Namit
- Melanie Nelson
- Barry Packer
- Michel Paulin
- Christine Perkins
- Daniel Phelan
- Susan Radwan
- Gentry Stickel
- Linda Stier
- Richard Stringham
- Hartger Wassink
- Brother Robert J. Wickman
- Lana Wong
- Paul Zilz

These dynamic and amazing Organizations renewed in 2022*:

- The Ann Arbor Area Transportation Authority (TheRide)
- College of Dental Hygienists of Ontario (CDHO)
- College of Medical Laboratory Technologists of Ontario (CMLTO)
- Colorado Association of School Boards
- Columinate
- Community Access Unlimited
- Community Financial Credit Union
- De La Salle Institute
- Hillcroft Services, Inc.
- Howard Suamico School District
- Meridian Edge Leadership & Governance Consulting
- Nova Scotia College of Nursing
- Nuvision Federal Credit Union
- Project Management Institute San Francisco Bay Area Chapter (PMISFBAC)
- Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union
- St. Mary Development Corporation
- Sun Prairie Area School District
- The Kidney Foundation of Canada
- William Carey International University
- W.K. Kellogg Foundation

Thank you to our renewing Individual Affiliates*:

- Dick Biery
- Bill Charney
- William Frater
- Marlene Janzen Le Ber
- Harry Nijkamp
- Chantal Ouellette
- Ray Tooley
- Elaine Vandale
- Eve Wenger

Welcome and thank you to our newest Fellows, GSPs:

- Richard Charles

Welcome to these Organizations:

- College of Dental Hygienists of Manitoba

- Bill Hunt
- Geogy Joseph
- Ramona Lewis
- Susan Meek
- Rosa-Maria Njuki
- Bradford Saron
- Steve Schroeder

Thank you to our new (or rejoining) Individual Affiliates:

- Bradley Casemore
- Robert Hott
- Eric Kapono
- Jack Legal
- Stacy Sjogren
- Steve Winninger
- Kim Withers

- Credit Union of New Jersey
- Ontario Native Literacy Coalition
- Six Nations Polytechnic
- Trinity Center for World Mission
- Wisconsin Youth Company

Do you know someone who should be part of our community?

Are you interested in learning more about the benefits of affiliateship or how to maximize your benefits?

Are you ready to renew your affiliateship?

Contact Jeremiah Dameron, Director of Affiliate Services at jdameron@governforimpact.org today!

Connect with Us On: Facebook Twitter LinkedIn

GOVERN for IMPACT

Empowered Boards.
Re-imagine the world...

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