



HITTING YOUR STRIDE

By Dr. Michael T. Adamson, Director of Board Services



There is nothing like running – the breeze hitting your face, full access to your senses, the power from your legs propelling you forward. At least that is the way I remember it . . . when I was a kid. That feeling of freedom and the ability to choose to run, as fast as I could, is something that I now view as a blessing of youth. But what I have found is that I still have the choice to run, and it is equally as challenging, not as in my youth, but now as an adult in those races not run with athleticism, but with dedication and time.

Perhaps, if life were as a footrace, things would be far simpler. But the races we run today as adults are not measured in meters or miles, but by careers and interests. Most of you reading this article have chosen public education governance as a race that is worthy of your time and effort, not as a vocation, but as a measure of philanthropy, a means of returning value to your community through your school district.

Ever since my early years as a school board member, the school board governance process has intrigued me. I had the good fortune of working with several board members with over 20 years of school board service, and I learned valuable lessons from each regarding the best (and worst) attributes that board members can exhibit. I have used those lessons, as well as the experiences of board members since 2006, to provide recommendations and to offer advice to Indiana board members in my capacity with the Indiana School Boards Association. I would like to believe that those recommendations have proven sound and have been received as “good” counsel for those questions of board roles and responsibilities.

What I have found most important to new board members is the initial learning curve that each new member invariably must go through. New board members must travel the initial path of “new board members,” and there are no detours. Along this route, new board members often stumble, make rookie mistakes, and perhaps feel a little out of place, or maybe even a little embarrassed, as a result of misinterpretations or comments made without a complete understanding of a situation. Of course, the more that new members rely on institutional wisdom, the less likely they are to make rookie mistakes. But even the benefits of sage advice from veteran school board members can only provide a limited amount of preventative protection. Ultimately, experience always provides the best lessons.

But after six to eight months, newer board members emerge from their novice status, and although they have not yet experienced many things that they may encounter during an entire term of office, most of the repetitive items are now well understood. They also understand line-of-authority, where to find answers within the system, and how to best voice their questions and concerns with their peers.

It is really about this time that newer board members begin to “hit their stride.” Just like in athletics, when an athlete is running, he or she reaches a point in a race where they find their equilibrium; their running motion becomes automatic, requiring less conscious energy to govern the bodily mechanics

of propelling them forward. When you do not have to think as much about the rules of engagement, when those rules become second nature, this is when you will start to be most effective. It is a liberating feeling to run with seemingly minimal effort.

Of course, there are always some board members who struggle with hitting their stride. Often it is because they entered school board service with unrealistic expectations regarding what their position as a school board member entails. They may have believed that, once elected or appointed, that they held specific individual authority or power to individually affect outcomes. Some members believe that the sole reason they were

elected was to impact a specific issue impacting the school district. Others arrive with an agenda of self-promotion seeking personal gain, notoriety, or a stepping stone for other public service positions or political offices. For them, the position is not about serving public education; it is about building a resumé. Of course, you cannot control individual board members’ ambitions or aspirations, but you must be prepared to reel them in from time to time.

Essentially, “hitting your stride” is more about the entire board rather than individual board members. While both are important, an individual’s sense

of boardsmanship must always yield to the collective model of boardsmanship that characterizes a particular board. How every board conducts its business is ultimately what matters. Finding a collective relationship that enables a board to effectively work as a unit is almost always the result of a conscious effort to reach that equilibrium by setting aside a board member’s feelings of self.

Let me be quick to say that I do not believe it essential for a board member to abandon his or her personal morals and convictions. But a board member’s passions may not be shared by the majority of the board, and ultimately, board decisions are a function of a majority, not individuals. Of course, nothing prevents a majority from making poor decisions, but that is the reality faced by all democratic institutions.

A well-functioning school board helps new board members hit their stride as they learn and gain experience with each successive meeting. It is understood, albeit sometimes

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overlooked, that new board members should not expect or be expected to know everything about everything. It will take the better part of two years to approach that comfort level. Still, the goal of every school board should be to lessen a new board member's learning curve so that new board members can more quickly attain the knowledge that enables the board to operate at 100% efficiency.

Having a plan to attain peak efficiency is important. Of course, that ability is impacted by district issues, the number of new board members, and how often the board meets. While I am not a proponent of frivolous meetings, there is something to be gained by meeting more frequently, especially after new members take office, and if the meetings are primarily for discussion or sharing information about programs and issues facing the district. Anything that can help shorten the learning curve enables a board to hit its stride more quickly and efficiently.

Hitting your stride as a board member and as a board-superintendent team is as much about desire as anything else. When a board member truly wishes to fulfill his or her responsibilities, they will devote the time and energy required to learn the role and how to actively participate in the decision-making process. Likewise, the board-superintendent team will work diligently to ensure that everyone understands the issues, is afforded opportunities to ask questions and receive answers in a timely fashion, and has the information from which to make informed decisions on the matters before the board.

When an entire board-superintendent team hits their stride, no task is too big and no obstacle too difficult to overcome because no single person or internal group stands alone. A united governing team is difficult to divert, and that positive momentum is contagious. Find your stride and . . . keep running! 🏃



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