

LEARNING LEADERSHIP

Make the effort to **learn how to effectively serve** your schools and your communities.

By *Kim Woodward, ISBA President*



Last year, our family went to Lake Tahoe so that our grandsons and son-in-law could learn to snowboard. Despite the fact that there was precious little snow, we had a good time...but not so much at snowboarding. You see, like most people, starting to learn a hard skill is humiliating, hard, and frustrating. No one

likes to be a novice.

Leadership is no different. Many people aspire to possess the leadership qualities of inspiring a shared vision, challenging the process, modeling the way, enabling others to act, and encouraging the heart. And, they want to be proficient...nay, **EXCEPTIONAL**, at it right away. But, you see, having the knowledge does not equal having the wisdom of leadership. Like snowboarding, you have to fall down, get wet, get hurt, and get up a thousand times to stand a chance of ever becoming proficient at it.

While Pete Rose is most certainly **NOT** my favorite baseball player (or even in the top 1000!), there is something profound about leadership to be found in Pete Rose's baseball career. Rose holds the greatest number of major league career hits in MLB with a stunning 4256 hits. Only he and Ty Cobb have ever attained the 4000+ mark. But, did you know that he also had 14,053 at bats in his career and is the all-time leader in at bats? There are only 29 players who ever made the 10,000 mark and he alone has 13,000 or more visits to the plate. If you try something 14,053 times over the course of dozens of years, you're going to get pretty good at it. Good leadership takes good practice at leadership. And, it takes learning from your mistakes and applying what you learn to the next at bat.

A group of leadership coaches were asked by Forbes Magazine recently about what mistakes leaders frequently make and,

hopefully, learn from. As school board leaders, we are frequently learning skills in boardsmanship that we don't use in our livelihoods or professions. The skills sets are sometimes different. These frequent mistakes (and how to avoid them) can propel your board leadership if you pay attention and learn the lessons they can teach.

MISTAKE #1: Be careful about how you present yourself

We've all heard the study by Dr. Albert Mehrabian, author of "Silent Messages" that says only 7% of your message comes through the words you say. A whopping 55% of one's message comes through in nonverbal facial expressions, posture, gestures, etc. The remaining 38% comes through in vocal tone and inflection. If you don't believe this, try saying "Good dog!" to your pet while raising your hand to hit her and yelling angrily. Board members should attend to their body language and tone of voice during presentations, board meetings, and school functions because we are being watched constantly as school leaders. Make sure you convey trust and confidence in your Superintendent and your fellow board members in how you present yourself, especially in public meetings.

MISTAKE #2: Utilize your mentors to the fullest extent

We were all new board members once. But not everyone on the board was new at the same time you were. Look for opportunities to ask questions, gain insight, and pick the brain of those who have served several terms on the board. While you may not agree with everything they say, you can certainly learn a lot of vocabulary and concepts from people who have been in the trenches for a while. Set your ego and novice aside and take advantage of their experience and know how.

MISTAKE #3: Take time to think

Use a 24- or 48-hour rule when something is about to evoke an emotional or controversial response. Use that time to think about

the situation, your response, the consequences, the upside and the downside. It can (and often does) change your perspective to the point that it changes your opinion. Reflection is not a sign of weakness in a leader. It's a sign of maturity.

MISTAKE #4: Be transparent and communicate clearly

Novice leaders often make assumptions which lead to misunderstandings and can even jeopardize relationships beyond repair. Savvy board members don't play game in why they're asking certain questions and they let others in on their motivations and provide a clear path to their reasoning. If you want to show leadership, always assume good intentions and ask questions respectfully with the intention of listening to understand.

MISTAKE #5: Give grace

You will fall down. You will fail. A conversation about schools will take place that sounds like another language has overtaken English. You not only won't understand the discussion, you will

question your own ability to adequately serve. Be gracious to yourself and simply listen with an open mind. The next time this topic comes up, you'll remember a few tidbits and by the tenth time, you'll be participating actively in the conversation. Also, be gracious enough to know how to recover from being proven wrong or corrected without digging a deep hole for yourself.

Effective leaders on school boards are not born. They are made. It takes intentional effort to learn how to effectively serve your schools and your communities in this role. If you give your best effort and, at the same time learn and grow from your mistakes, you will propel your abilities quickly.

After all, in leadership as in snowboarding, if you don't fall down, get wet, get hurt, and get up a thousand times, you'll never feel the exhilaration of gliding down a snow-laden mountaintop of indescribable beauty with the wind at your back. ❄️



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