

## Tips on Working with a Board Member Who May Appear to Be Micromanaging

*The term “micromanaging”  
may be a matter of your perspective*

One of the most common challenges which confronts administrators is when a Board of Education (BOE) member overreaches their position or appears to be micromanaging an issue, situation or event. This can present a major problem depending on the seriousness of the issue, as many times relationships can be damaged or jobs lost based on how these challenges are addressed. It is important, therefore, when a micromanagement issue comes up to deal with it appropriately.

Articles on micromanaging typically beat the well-worn drum about the respective roles and responsibilities of the BOE and administration. While understanding these is important, what really matters is when they are put into practice, as that is where the problems arise. So I decided to take a different approach, soliciting the perspective of a three (3) year BOE member who I know, and who is often labeled a micromanager. Perhaps understanding the mindset of someone who clearly has more extensive information needs than most and who believes in participative decision-making would provide insight on how to deal with BOE members like her. We will call her Katrina.

Katrina ran for her school board after digging up her district’s financial and student outcome data on the Ohio Department of Education’s website. “Let’s just say that there was room for improvement,” she explained. “Once on the board, I started asking a lot of questions and asking for data. I wanted to see goals and objectives, and I wanted to see evaluations. That did not go over very well, and I was viewed as a micromanager and troublemaker.”

“My job as a board member,” she continued, “is to represent the district’s constituents in providing the best education possible for our students while being a good steward of taxpayer dollars. If I am not holding the administration accountable and if I am not addressing constituent complaints, then I am not doing the job I was elected to do. As a board member, I represent the voice of the students, parents and resident-taxpayers.” She champions an evaluation system which includes congruent goals for the superintendent and the district as a whole to improve student performance and live within the community’s financial means.

I asked Katrina how she felt when some of the BOE members and administrators called her a micromanager. She answered, “Board members are told that our role is to set policy, to trust the administrators to run the district, and to be a cheerleader for the district, regardless of what is going on. Sometimes ugly truths come to light, and they need to be explored in depth in order to be addressed. That means asking questions and arriving at an opinion based on the data. And that is what is viewed as micromanaging.”

BOE members come to their position with widely divergent personalities, backgrounds, and motivations, so consequently board members approach their job in a different way. Ideally, a district should benefit from the merging of this range of board member experience, capability, and perspective. For many boards and districts, however, this isn’t the case; lack of communication and trust causes fracturing within the board, contentious decision-making, and ultimately stagnation for the district. “Particularly in this environment,” said Katrina, “asking questions is seen as destabilizing a system which may be already teetering on chaos.”

Katrina concluded, “Something which administrators sometimes forget is that they are running a multi-million dollar operation using public funds. This means that virtually every document - from W-2s to personnel files to emails - is open for inspection by not just board members, but by any member of the public. That’s the cost of running a public business rather than one in the private sector.”

How would a BOE member know when they are inappropriately micromanaging or very validly raising issues which need to be addressed? There seems to be a very fine line between the two and it may come down to perception of other BOE members who are not interested in a particular issue, of the administration, or of the individual BOE member who may or may not be micromanaging.

Good advice and tips from the discussion with Katrina and from my own experience is that it is important for administrators to truly listen to a BOE member who is seeking data, raising issues, or asking for clarification. Also it is important for administrators to not be defensive in their interactions with the BOE member. This will only make the individual distrust you, when in many cases they just want to know or learn.

I also find it helpful to not judge the motivation of the individual BOE member seeking information or making requests. If you are getting data for one BOE member make sure to provide the data to all BOE members so everyone has the same information.

Many times in my experience as a treasurer, a BOE member who seemed to be micromanaging and digging for data often wound up being a big supporter of the treasurer's office and district because they received the information needed and came to their own conclusion by working with us. Providing the information requested and in a timely manner goes a long way to establishing the trust which is so essential for a good board/administration relationship. Remember it is district administrators' job to be the public servants, providing those data and helping BOE members to understand district operations.

BOE members, regardless of their motivation, need accurate information and data about their district - financial, student performance, and sometimes even operational - in order to do their job. Without these data, board members cannot tell when they are inappropriately micromanaging or asking valid questions regarding systemic issues which need to be addressed. And in the latter case, BOE member are just doing their job, living up to the trust which was placed in them by their constituents.