



One Simple Question to Distinguish Governance from Management Responsibilities

Here's a valuable board self-appraisal question: Does your board spend most of its time in meetings on governance or management matters? Before you answer that, let me explain how you can tell. Let's begin by defining, in simple terms, the difference in governance and management responsibilities.

Management's responsibility is to *make* the school perform and the board's responsibility is to *make sure* it performs. (Broadly defined, charter school performance is accomplishing the outcomes for which the school was chartered within all applicable statutory, regulatory, and financial parameters.) I summarize this distinction in responsibilities using what I call the two *e-words*: **executing** (what management does) and **ensuring** (what the board does). The two words are worth memorizing.

Now, if you think about it, because executing is about getting things done, a principal (or management company) has to ask and answer an endless stream of what I call, **how will** questions. For example, How will we structure the academic calendar so that the students achieve grade-level mastery in English? School leaders draw upon their professional expertise (or the expertise of others) to find the best answers and they are accountable to the board for the results.

On the other hand, because ensuring is about making sure that everything gets done right, a board should regularly ask what I call, **how well** questions.

For example, How well is the school's calendar working to help students achieve grade-level mastery in English?

With a few exceptions (such as those issues pertaining to *how will the board require management to operate lawfully, ethically, and prudently*,¹) you can apply this question to almost every aspect of school performance: **Is this a how will or a how well issue?**

So, does your board spend most of its time in meetings on governance or management matters? To answer this, comb through six-to-twelve months of minutes, and categorize everything that was discussed, using the *how will/how well* question. By definition, almost every *how will* discussion is a management matter. Such information may be nice to know, but it's not usually information the board *needs to know* in order to perform its governance responsibilities.

Moreover, regularly holding *how will* discussions in board meetings has a real cost. Those issues push critical *how well* items off the table. In other words, your board has only so much time each month to perform its oversight responsibility of ensuring that the school is performing. If it squanders that time discussing and debating an endless array of *how will* issues, it may find its charter in jeopardy as in the Case In Point on page 2.

¹ *Boards That Make A Difference* by Dr. John Carver

Board Self-Appraisal Questions/Recommendations

1. Do your minutes of the past six to twelve months reflect that the board understands that its role is one of *ensuring* rather than *executing*? (Has it spent most of its meetings discussing "how will?" or "how well?" matters?)
2. How many times in the past 12 months, *according to your minutes*, did the board evaluate *how well* the students are achieving the outcomes in your charter?

Case in Point

DIRTY WALLS

In reading through a year's worth of minutes for a client board, I happened upon the dialogue that follows: (Copied verbatim--punctuation errors and all--except that I've added job titles for clarity and changed the names to ensure anonymity.)

"Mr. Smith (business manager) states that there are no unusual circumstances this month and that the school remains in good standings, before continuing with the financial report Mr. Green (management company president) would like to talk about the quotes for painting the walls, he states that the budget is very tight and in order to do all the painting in the building something would have to be cut out from the budget, Mr. Smith suggests that we cut 2 aide positions. Mrs. Jones (board member) thinks that a staff cut is not a good idea. Mr. Smith states that the way the budget was written, we only have \$5,000.00 in revenue over expenses. Mr. Green suggests that a detailed cleaning can be made to the walls instead. Mrs. Jones wants to know if the quotes were given by companies based out of [their state or a nearby adjacent state]. Mr. Smith says the company is based out of Anytown, [nearby adjacent state]. Mrs. Jones recommends that we use [their state] contractors whenever possible. Mr. Smith says that the management company is open to any suggestions the Board has. Mrs. Wallace (another board member) suggests doing the project in phases; Mrs. Jones thinks it can be done over the course of 2 – 3 years."

Hmm. Where to start. First, the board is perfectly within the scope of its oversight responsibilities to expect that school facilities be properly maintained. Instead of having a meandering *how will* discussion, however, the board should simply enact a policy directing management to do so. The same is true for the vendor issue. If the board feels it's important to use vendors from their state rather than the nearby adjacent state, it should create a vendor selection criteria policy. Should management deviate from these, or any other board policies, the board's conversation becomes one of asking *how soon* management intends to bring the school back into compliance.

But here's the kicker, and it illustrates the *real cost* of focusing on *how will* questions in your meetings. For the past four or five years, this particular school has performed in the bottom 25% of all public schools in the state where it operates. In the current year, it's in the bottom 15%, and the charter is now up for renewal. The challenge in front of the board is how to apply for renewal in the wake of years of inferior academic performance. And though it had recently begun to seriously evaluate *how well* the students should be doing (even before attending my seminar), the board had spent far too much time in meetings, mired waist-deep in "dirty wall discussions" instead of focusing on student outcomes. As of this moment, it remains to be seen whether this will cost them their charter. That's a high price to pay for holding too many *how will* discussions.

About This Publication & The Author

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Dr. Brian L. Carpenter is widely regarded as one of the foremost authorities on charter school governance. Both of his books, *Charter School Board University* and *The Seven Outs: Strategic Planning Made Easy for Charter Schools* are used by schools, associations, and universities. For information on engaging Dr. Carpenter to conduct a board development retreat or to speak at your conference, call (989) 205-4182 or email him at Brian@BrianLCarpenter.com.

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