



How to Manage a Micromanaging Board

As regular readers of *The Kansas Lifeline* may recall, many of the topics that we cover are from the perspective of the board or council members. So if you are a board or council member, you may want to stop reading now, because THIS article is for your manager – not you. The word "board" in this article generally refers to rural water district boards but the same issues fit for council members of smaller communities.

So, board and council members, actually, you can keep reading a bit longer if you want to know the answer to this question: what is the number one complaint from small system staff? A) salaries; B) crazy hours; C) difficult customers; or, D) micromanaging board members? If you picked D, you are correct. Again and again, disgruntled system employees have shared with me that the number one thing they dislike about their job is the fact that the board micromanages them about the operational details that are really not their purpose, and then refuses to address the “hard” stuff like budgets and policies.

And the stories are epic. Frankly, if you’ve ever had a boss who stood over you while you did your job, you’ll understand. Because that’s exactly what some of these board members do. One board member made it a point to go out to every excavation or line repair and watch the employees or the contractor operate the equipment. In addition to offering them advice on how to do the work, he’d basically give an oral report on the project at the next board meeting. This drove the manager and the staff nuts. New or younger staff were nervous having a board member observe and report on them. The manager was forced to go out to job sites and try to run interference. This pulled him away from his regularly scheduled work

and also added to the length of the board meetings, when the board member would insist on giving his “after action” report on a meter installation or a line repair.

Another board was famous for having board members handle any customer complaints. Customers had become accustomed to calling their board member/neighbor directly with every issue from rusty water to billing errors. This created an added and unnecessary layer of complexity for the office staff, who had to deal with garbled calls from board members relaying these complaints, or worse, one board member who would drop by the office and let them know about a complaint so that they could stop what they were doing and call the customer then and there. He felt that

this was what good customer service looked like. The billing clerk in the district threatened to quit after two other board members repeatedly called her to tell her that they had received dozens of calls from customers that the bills were wrong – when what actually happened was that the rate increase that the board had agreed upon at a meeting those two gentlemen had missed had taken effect.

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Board members who always second guess

I have attended countless board meetings and had board members second guess the staff on everything from quotes on a new truck to CD renewal rates to paint shades for the water storage tank. The “Case of the Water Tower Paint Shades” was classic. It was time to repaint the elevated water storage tank and the manager got quotes from the two area companies that painted water towers. As part of his routine presentation to the board, he noted that the quotes had been received, were within budget and that work would proceed shortly. Then a board member asked what color the

tower was being painted. The answer? The same color as before. Another board member mentioned that it might be nice to have a different shade of blue and then another board member said that it might be nice to look at paint samples and see how many shades of blue they could choose from. But the first board member said that he didn't want this tower painted a different shade than the other two towers. The manager and I sat there for an hour and a half while the board debated these issues, and we ended up tabling the review and vote on the revised policies and procedures, which was the only reason I had attended the meeting in the first place. In fact, two more months went by with lots more discussion of paint colors. And without the board taking the time to handle the more important agenda item. Finally the board president called me and said that he had chatted with a couple of the other board members at the coffee shop and we didn't need to keep policy issues on the old business part of the agenda because they had basically approved it and he would sign them. Sometimes you have to give up. Now I am sure that the board did not read the policies and procedures but I at least knew that they were correctly written and the manager and I decided that it was probably better to get them in place and start following them, rather than argue with the board over approving them. I'm not saying that a board shouldn't care about the appearance of the system's water towers. I understand what a symbol of pride a water tower can be.

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But to focus on the little items and ignore the important procedural issues is a class result of a micromanaging board.

In addition to making the meetings brutally long, this type of over-involvement with day-to-day activities can create potential ethical issues. One board member said he had stopped by the office and picked up a copy of the quotes for a new district truck, because

he had heard from a staff member that they were all from out of town dealerships, and he wanted to show them to his brother who owned a local car dealership in order to see if he could offer the district a lower price. This scenario alone is practically the basis for an attorney general opinion letter. No one doubted that this board member's heart was in the right place, but the manager had specifically gone out of town in order to get blind quotes and not have any nepotism/favoritism complaints. Maybe the manager could have obtained a blind quote from the board member's brother too, but he was exercising his discretion as the manager and planned on letting the board know that the district was buying a new truck and that he had handled the comparative bid process without involving them. Now the board was faced with a real ethical problem, because the exact situation the manager had hoped to avoid was being presented at an open meeting. I had to interject and explain that while it might have looked a little bit iffy to get a quote from the board member's brother it was completely inappropriate to let the board member's brother see the other

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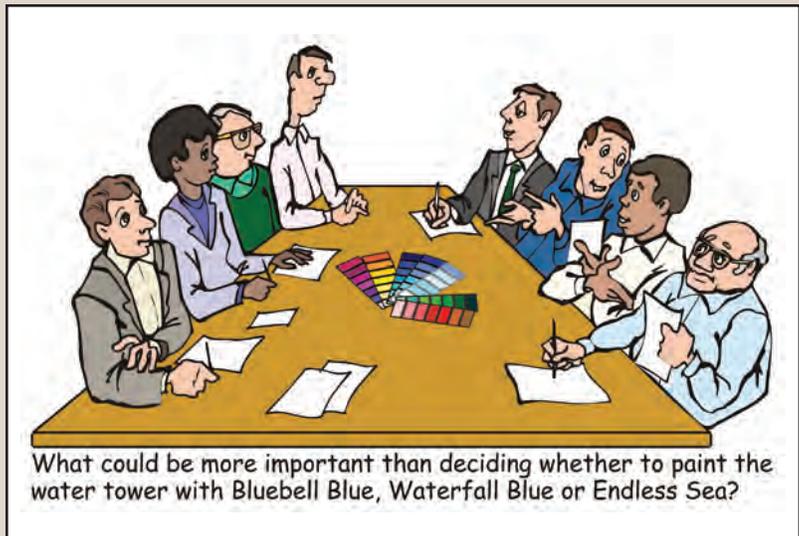
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dealership's quotes and then present a lower bid! The meeting devolved into a Board Ethics 101 session and we didn't get out of there until nearly 10 p.m. It was because one well-meaning board member decided to insert himself into day-to-day district operations.

Why boards micromanage

It's important to understand why boards micromanage. This is really a cultural issue and it goes back to the earliest water district boards, the ones that generally consisted of a handful of rural folks, often farmers. And there is no more hands-on, can-do bunch than country folks! Self-reliant, frugal, skeptical – these are just a few of the terms that describe us. (Yes, I grew up on a cattle farm in the Ozarks, 45 minutes from town and we still depend on well water and rural electric power.) Few if any of these early boards had a manager and the board members, the rural folks who decided to take advantage of the new USDA program and get clean drinking water, did everything themselves. Heck, there are STILL small water and sewer systems that don't have an actual manager, just an employee or two who read meters and operate the system equipment. I've met original board members who would go out at night with their own backhoe and fix leaks, after they got a call from a neighbor/customer that water pressure had dropped. These original boards held meetings as infrequently as possible, never on Wednesday (church night), and relied on



that one board member who really acted as a de facto manager. Remember that guy? He had the system map in his head, knew every connection and was often the board president for many years. Board meetings, when they occurred, almost always opened with a discussion of the current hunting or fishing season. In fact, sometimes system decisions were made at a fishing hole, because these original boards were usually a group of guys who were all friends or neighbors.

So this group of rural folks had invested time and actual sweat in the original system and would naturally want to be involved in every detail of its operation. And this culture of hands-on management was perpetuated by successive boards. Board turnover was rare, and if necessary a current board member usually recruited a successor and it was only natural that the recruit had a similar outlook and dedication to the cause. And any new board member would observe the board culture in place and fall in line. The main goal in early districts was get clean water to a few hundred friends and neighbors and to keep rates down.

The distinction between governing and managing

Even when small systems have grown and hired a manager, this habit of micromanaging persists. And frankly, human nature contributes to the tendency of boards to focus on the small things, rather than deal with large policy issues. Board members today are forced to deal with increasing levels of regulation that address public health, environmental protection and economic development. They have to handle long-term planning in order to meet fiduciary responsibilities, make and approve budgets, approve rate increases, carry out by-laws and policies and procedures, and comply with local, state and federal law. It's hard! It means reviewing

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complex documents, getting briefed by attorneys, managers, and engineers, and even attending training. It's much easier to focus on the familiar and to deal with the fun stuff. Like paint colors and truck shopping.

But board members have to govern – not manage. And implementing organizational change like this is difficult, because changing a board's culture and cultural shifts take time. Plus this is bottom-up change, not top-down change, so it is much more difficult. A successful manager has to obtain collaboration and can't simply order a board to do things differently. A small system board has only one true employee after all – the manager. The board hires and fires the manager. The manager hires and fires other employees. But they are also elected officials, and their terms are set by law. This is a high-wire act if there ever was one. The most successful managers I know recognize this and pull off a shift from micromanaging to policy implementation on a dual short-term, long-term track. It means working with the board on baby steps (short-term), while at the same time looking down the road to seek out and recruit possible board members who can understand the govern-manage distinction (long-term).

The long-term track requires some board analysis. Theoretically, a board could have all new members in about five years. Are some of the current members only serving because they feel like they have to be? If there were a qualified candidate who stepped up, would they heave a sigh of relief and decline to run? Can the manager start looking for these kinds of candidates? I know one savvy old manager who basically helped handpick board members. He was the Huey Long of board politics, but he had a board that governed and left him alone to manage the operations of the district. There is no reason that a manager shouldn't be out in the community developing new board talent. I know another manager who with this board's approval, mailed out a flyer once a year called "Would you like to be a Water District Board Member? Why not?"

For the short-term track, ask yourself if some of the board members are capable of learning how to let go of day-to-day operations? Maybe all the board members are not micromanagers and may be able to recognize the govern-manage distinction when it is pointed out to them. There may be an ally or two on the board already who can serve as agents of change. Sometimes a suggestion from a board

member, such as "When customers call us with complaints, why don't we ask them to reach out to the office staff or the manager first?" might be a way to get the ball rolling. This is a common complaint from staff, and it also makes it easier for board members, who rarely will know the answer anyway. Or as manager, you can suggest that it might be easier for board members to refer complaints to staff, because you want to track them and address them quickly. Then if staff is unable to reach a resolution with the customer, you, the manager, will put the complaint on the agenda and bring it to the attention of the board as a matter that requires their attention. Offering to take the burden off of the board members (even when handling these matters is really your job) is a subtle way of changing their collective behavior. One manager I know started issuing "Time Saver" memos to the board with suggestions like this at the same time that he kept attaching the complicated documents that the board needed to actually review. Because most of his board members were retirees, the same smart guy also held a board coffee one morning a week, where he brought in donuts and encouraged them to drop by the office and chat. He was able to let them micromanage him for about an hour or so, and this helped keep them on track at the monthly meetings. You can also continuously emphasize this time-saving concept in agenda items or if the board gets off track during the meeting. Managers can offer to handle a complaint outside the meeting that gets brought up by a customer, and remind the board that the manager really needs their input on the budget, feasibility study, rate increase which is next on the agenda.

None of this will happen overnight. Even the short-term solution requires patience and finesse. Many managers may not yet recognize how much their board micromanages! If anyone can't clearly explain the govern/manage distinction, ponder that first, then start the journey on the path of change management.

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