

How To Be a Productive RWD Board or Council Member



After spending fourteen years on our local school board with five as board president, I have had a variety of experiences that I believe have provided me the experience and knowledge to be a successful board member and how to be part of a successful board/council.

The first experiences dealt with the hiring process of an administrator. Hire the best person for the job. The most important aspect sometimes is the fact that a manager may lack experience. As long as the candidate has had some management experience before, many times a viable candidate can step up and learn the intricacies of a new job. How many times have you heard that someone does not have enough experience? How does one get experience without having the chance to learn something new? In our small school district, we very seldom had the opportunity to interview candidates who had been superintendents before. I had the experience of hiring and working with three superintendents during my term; all of them had strong and weak points. However, I believe that you will find these points in any candidate and you do the best job you can to find the right fit for your situation. It was important for me to take the time to get to know these candidates and build relationships with them. Because of doing so, I still consider them friends to this day.

Trying to solve a problem without having all the information usually does not end well.

Once you hire the candidate, it is important to provide that person with all the educational support that you can find. Schools, workshops, and just networking with their peers are all effective ways to help them access the experiences they will need to make your community or water district, and themselves, successful. KRWA can be a useful resource for board and manager support. Speaking of support, it is important that the board/council tries to back the manager/administrator on his/her decisions. Sure, mistakes will be made. These mistakes can turn into valuable lifelong learning experiences. Sometimes as a board/council we need to step back and let the employees try operating their way first because sometimes the old ways of doing

things are not always the best. Also, when customers complain, ask them if they have talked to the employee who is responsible for that area. I have found most of the time when I ask the question, "Have you tried talking to the person in charge?" If the answer is "no", then encourage the person to go through the proper chain of command. Trying to solve a problem without having all the information usually does not end well.

Maintaining a good working relationship with your manager is another key component to being a successful

board/council member. Your manager can be one of your most important assets. Face-to-face meetings are the best way to handle conflicts. In this world of emails and social media no one can read between the lines. I personally like to read body language and facial expressions to truly tell what the other person is thinking. Email is a great tool when passing information between employees. However, solving conflicts over email can sometimes damage relationships. You do not have to be best friends, but keep your meetings with each other as cordial as possible. Usually, not everything has to be decided on the spot. A good exchange of ideas to be revisited later is an excellent way to handle meetings. When serving on the school district board, all of the members felt as a group that it was not necessary to try to make a decision during the current meeting. A little time to reflect and put things into perspective can be quite beneficial. Putting it off until a subsequent meeting always seemed to work out well. This again provides members a chance to gather information, think about the situation and put things into perspective before the next meeting.

Don't micromanage the manager!

Another key component to having a successful manager or administrator is for board/council members to allow the person to manage. This is the main element the person was hired to do. As a former school board member, I could not have known all of the day-to-day operations of a school. I had to rely on management to get through the mounds of paperwork and bring the critical issues to the board. So my advice is to try to learn all you can about the board/council you are serving on. Again, KRWA can supply good information and experience just by asking. The worst thing a board/council member can do is try to micromanage. Imagine if you worked in a job where board members were trying to tell you how to do your job. Set goals and work towards those goals, but keep in mind that sometimes goals may have to be adjusted from time to time. It is important to revisit goals that are not working and keep those that are working on the right track.

Behind every good manager is a good board clerk or office staff. Therefore, it is important to make sure the board clerk or city clerk is properly trained and has the knowledge needed to be successful. The board clerk or

city clerk tends to be a key to keeping needed checks and balances in place. Clerks or office staff also seem to have their thumb on the smaller picture. They hopefully have the time to focus on financial obligations, both short and long term. The clerks I have worked with in the past usually could pull numbers from memory to answer financial questions that the board may have. A manager and clerk who work well together are beneficial to a successful board/council.

Good board members work together

Another key component of a successful board are board members that try to work together as one. No board will agree on every agenda item, however, if a board member has a concern then the concern should be expressed in a respectful manner. Boards/councils are made up of different personalities and that is a good thing. Through my own experience, our school district built a new school; that is a topic I knew a great deal about. When it came to the construction piece I was able to give a valuable opinion on the construction. However, on other parts of the project, I had to rely on other board members to help me understand the process, just as I had helped them understand the construction process.

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Different life experiences are what makes up a well-rounded board/council. Imagine never even wanting to see a situation from another point of view. There is always room for negotiations, even when you are dead set on having it your own way. The best boards are built on compromises and working through tough issues and decisions.

It is important for board/council members to take time to read the agenda well in advance of the meeting. If there are any questions, get them to the manager well ahead of the meeting time. The same questions that you have may be the same questions other board/council members are pondering. Lots of items might not have to be considered until the manager has time to assemble the information. Try to be precise in the information wanted and why it is wanted. The manager might have other pertinent information that could be helpful to present to the board/council at meeting time.

Try to keep board/council meetings as short as possible. I have found that board meetings that last much over a few hours become difficult for board members to concentrate. No one likes to have extra meetings, but they may be necessary. Keep the meeting from becoming too serious. While what you are doing during the meeting is important, a little joke or an occasional break will make the time more enjoyable.

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In conclusion, enjoy your time on the board/council. The job you are doing will last long after you have finished your board experience. You may even be asked to give an opinion down the road. The fourteen years I served on our local board of education has opened up a variety of doors for me. I have made valuable contacts and have received a vast amount of knowledge that helps me at my current position. It is very rewarding to serve on a board and know you

are making a difference in your community. I greatly enjoyed my years of serving on my local board and I hope you will also.

And if KRWA can be of any help to your board or council, please email to me at bret@krwa.net or give the office a call at 785-336-3760.

Bret Beye joined the KRWA staff in March 2017. He previously worked for 30 years at the city of Herington where he was Water Distribution and Sewer Collection Foreman. A Class III water operator and certified as a backflow device technician, Bret also served on the USD 487 Board of Education from 2003 to April 2017 where he was board president and vice-president.





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