

What Makes a Board Effective?

With the recent elections behind us, this is a timely moment to revisit the traits that contribute to a successful, high-functioning Board of Directors. Originally shared in the Ask Evan from the October-November 2017 newsletter, these qualities remain just as relevant today.

As you review the following characteristics, consider how they show up – or could be strengthened – within your district’s Board.

Foundations of a Healthy Board

- » **Open and honest communication:** fosters clarity and accountability.
- » **Trust:** the backbone of collaboration – essential for good governance.
- » **No secret agendas:** Board members should approach issues with transparency and integrity.
- » **Respect for all opinions,** even when there’s disagreement, leads to stronger outcomes.

Interpersonal Dynamics that Make a Difference

- » **Use a respectful tone of voice:** How something is said matters as much as what is said. Disagreements can be constructive when delivered with care and professionalism.
- » **De-escalate, don’t inflame:** Responding calmly during tense moments sets the tone for the entire Board and preserves credibility with the public.
- » **Mutual respect** is essential: even if Board members don’t become friends, they are still teammates in service to the public.
- » **You don’t have to be friends, but you do have to work together:** Boards that function well focus on collaboration, not camaraderie.
- » **Build and protect public trust:** Community confidence is hard-earned and quickly lost. Your interactions – with each other and with the public—reflect on the district as a whole.

Avoiding Harmful Patterns

- » **Avoid cliques:**
 - > Aligning votes outside of meetings undermines open dialogue.
 - > Frequent side conversations between select members can foster suspicion.
 - > Inclusion builds trust; exclusion erodes it.

- » **Avoid ambush:** Don’t surprise the Chair, District Manager, or Fire Chief with unexpected charges or issues during a public meeting. Bring concerns forward in a way that allows for preparation and thoughtful discussion.
- » **Avoid online conflict:** Social media is not the place for Board debates. Public arguments on digital platforms damage the Board’s credibility, escalate tensions, and reduce the chance for thoughtful resolution.

Staying Focused on the Right Work

- » **Keep your focus on policy:** The Board’s role is to set direction, not micromanage operations.
- » **Ask the right questions:**
 - > Is this truly a Board matter or should it be handled by staff?
 - > If this issue has been resolved before, what’s changed to warrant revisiting it?
- » **Be inclusive in communication:** Make sure all Board members are informed and engaged.
- » **Own the outcome:** Every Board member shares responsibility for decisions and the Board’s effectiveness.

Decision-Making and Moving Forward

- » **Nonpartisan by design:** Special district Boards exist to serve the public interest, not party platforms.
- » **The goal is not to win – it’s to develop sound policy and find the best solutions.**
- » **Good Boards think ahead:** Effective Boards peer into the future and shape policies that guide the district toward long-term success.
- » **Disagree without being disagreeable:** Debate the idea, not the person.
- » **Listen for value:** Every member has something to contribute. Seek the gem in every voice.
- » **Once a decision is made, support it:** Functioning Boards do not issue minority reports. Speaking with one voice—especially after robust deliberation—builds trust and shows leadership.

While every Board is different, the most successful ones share a few essential qualities: **clear communication, mutual respect, policy discipline, and a shared commitment to public service.** These traits help Boards navigate difficult issues, foster public confidence, and serve their communities well. 🍃