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Building Your Dream Team
By
Christina Drouin

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to have ... a board that was a nonprofit governance dream? ...a dream team skilled in leveraging every dimension of its capital—social, political, intellectual, as well as financial? ...a boardroom where top local talent clamor to serve?

You are not alone. The good news is that there are structures, processes, and behaviors that can, over time, build a board culture that results in such a dream team and dream boardroom experience. Given these economically challenging times, it is essential that schools strive to make this happen.

Just what might a dream team look like?

While dream team attributes will vary from time to time based on the school, there are some constant features that all share. First, dream teams have a strong sense of identity, knowing what they stand for and what their purpose is. They also have in-depth knowledge of the playing field, possessing a clear and shared understanding of their most important long-term work, and their short-term strategic priorities.

Highly effective boards are passionately engaged in their work. They have the bench strength to get the job done and when they don't, they know how to build it or where to get it. Dream boards invest in building the board/head partnership and know this work ranks high in importance. They have ensured the continuity of leadership at the top of the institution as well as planned their own succession. They link the direction and goals they set for the school with the needs, wants, and expectations of the constituents they serve.

Boards do their best work when they are accountable and aligned — board member values are aligned with board values, which are aligned with school values. They lead with humility and execute their ambassadorial roles like pros.

Great things happen when good boards think generatively and operate strategically. The best boards know they do not have all the answers, but are confident in their ability to ask the right, and sometimes ‘undiscussable’ questions. The most effective boards are truly discerning — willing to listen, reflect, and acknowledge that the right answers can come from unexpected places and untraditional thoughts. They even agree that there is often not just one right answer! Great boards place a high value on strategic information and their ability to process it in a variety of innovative and creative ways. They are at their best when they listen thoughtfully, debate enthusiastically, and interact respectfully. Ultimately, the dream board can sustain leadership because it engages in self-reflection and self-transformation.

Dream boards are intent on building a culture of trust and therefore are willing to extend to each other presumptive goodwill while working relationships get some traction. Over time, presumptive goodwill, actual behaviors, and competent performance give way to trust as small successes lead to bigger successes. Through their effectiveness, dream boards have gained confidence in their ability to govern.

Another essential attribute is a clear and central focus on values and mission and an ability to use them as coordinates in charting the course of their decisions. For many board members, these lively conversations and passionate debates will be remembered as among their most valued board experiences long after the term of service is over.

Before launching down the path to becoming a dream board, here are some questions a board and head should consider about the board’s current effectiveness and readiness for board development:

- **Are we doing the right work?** Have we identified what matters? Have we organized around what matters? Are we doing what matters? Dick Chait and Barabara Taylor introduced this approach to governance in “The New Work of the Nonprofit Board” (*Harvard Business Review* 1996). It is simple, direct, and impactful. *Finding out what matters* involves getting strategic information and making disciplined decisions about a strategic agenda of limited focus. *Organizing around what matters* may involve creating disequilibrium in the current board structure to reorganize committees, ad hocs, task forces, and so on, to get the work done with the people equipped to perform best. *Doing what matters* may require working at the margins, partnering in unique and different ways, and at the end of the day, being willing to be accountable and evaluated. In the

absence of a board-based strategic plan, this approach can get and keep the board on track.

- **Do we have written goals tied to the institutional strategic plan?** Dream boards self-evaluate annually. While there are several ways and tools to use, one simple and direct approach is to assess effectiveness along three dimensions: progress on written *board* goals; progress on written *board committee* goals; and progress on written *board member* goals. Ideally, there is also a board-based strategic plan that is being worked on, so each of these areas has some strategic trajectory beyond the current year.
- **How does our decision-making process maximize our effectiveness?** Dream boards force decisions, informed by strategic information, through the dual filter of values and mission. They use strategic information to analyze and evaluate options, ensure the continued relevance of the school's strategic direction and plan, and to regularly test assumptions.
- **Do we have a way to approach board development?** *Governance as Leadership: Reframing the Work of Nonprofit Boards* (Chait, Ryan, and Taylor) provides an excellent framework for reflection, dialogue, and decision-making on what it will take to mature and evolve. The three governance models that the authors propose — fiduciary, strategic, and generative — provide valuable context for board growth and development.

You say your board isn't dreamy yet? You want to pursue the dream while not taking focus off tackling critical challenges facing the school? As a new school year begins, here are some immediate actions that board chairs and heads can take:

1. *Create a board-based strategic plan* to ensure engagement, cohesiveness and strategic focus. The process offers a framework for meaningful conversations about values, mission, strategic issues, assumptions, vision, goals, and strategies. In other words, the board-based strategic plan will help the board answer the critical questions of what do we stand for, what is our purpose, what are our issues, what do we project for the future, what success looks like, what must we accomplish, and how will we do it?
2. *Make board meetings more strategic and meaningful* by thinking of board meetings along a continuum rather than meeting to meeting. Create a strategic agenda for the year by identifying several macro topics to explore over the course of 2009-10. Assign a board member and a key administrative leadership team member to research each topic, write and present a white paper on the target topic at the appointed board meeting. Put this at the top of the meeting agenda, not at the end, when all the creative energy has drained out of the room. Then open the floor to a timed period of enthusiastic discourse!
3. *Plan now for 2010-11* by setting the date for an end-of-year retreat in April, May, or June 2010 to set goals for 2010-11.
4. *Raise the bar on expectations:* increase engagement, focus on board development, improve performance, think strategically, and measure results.

5. *Ramp-up communication between board meetings.* Using technology better to overcome traditional barriers of time and space can vastly improve communication. Password-protected board pages on the school website can create new and timely venues for collaboration and getting work done between meetings. One annual one-on-one meeting between each board member and the head of school can have high impact.
6. *Build a portfolio of strategic behaviors* that are rooted in core ideology of values and mission, targeted to address what matters most, fueled by a shared vision of success, measured by the right metrics, and made relevant by reflective review and recalibration.

An aspiring dream team can move closer to goal with the help of school leadership. As the board does its own development work, the administrative leadership team has a significant role to play in impacting positive results and can take several steps to help the board realize its full potential:

1. *They can...*become a reliable source of strategic information for the board.
2. *They can...*encourage best practices in nonprofit board development by making sure board leadership is knowledgeable about, and takes advantage of, reliable resources such as those available through NAIS, accrediting organizations, and others outside the independent school world.
3. *They should...*encourage board understanding and familiarity with metrics that matter in measuring performance and results in independent schools. While one of the board's key responsibilities is institutional evaluation, making certain that metrics are appropriately aligned with school values, mission and vision can be a shared responsibility. This is as differentiated from metrics customarily accepted in the for-profit sector. A valuable resource for this purpose is a working paper written by Mark Moore at the Kennedy Center School of Government at Harvard University called "The Public Value Scorecard: A Rejoinder and an Alternative to Strategic Performance Measurement and Management in Non-Profit Organizations."Debating its concepts is exactly the kind of process that will take the board into a strategic and generative conversation, adding immediate value to the board experience and long term value to the institution.
4. *They should...*collaborate to establish clear boundaries, clarify roles and responsibilities, and set clear expectations. Conflict often comes from unmet expectations. One essential way to avoid conflict is to be clear about boundaries, roles, responsibilities, and ultimately how success will be measured.
5. *They must...*actively and fully support the relationship of head and board chair and build their own individual and collective leadership capacity. By doing this they will actively help the board fulfill its key role of evaluation of the head of school and the advancement of the school's strategic goals.
6. *They must...*do their part operationally to deliver on the mission and core competencies while thinking strategically about the future sustainability.

This year can be the year for your board and top administrators to work together to build the board dream team. Begin with a vision of what the dream team looks like, surface the issues in achieving the dream, set realistic goals and strategy to overcome the issues, then take steps necessary to reach the goals. The work it takes to develop your dream team — where all trustees are valued, feel they belong, and are highly effective — is well worth the investment. The highest dividend accrues to the institution in being and becoming known as “the ultimate nonprofit board to serve on” in the community.

Christina Drouin is executive director of the Center for Strategic Planning. She has co-authored numerous NAIS books on governance, has contributed to Independent School magazine, and presents and consults with nonprofits — including NAIS schools — nationwide. She can be reached at drouin@planonline.org.

Additional Resources

- See the companion podcast at [Building Your Dream Board Team](#)
- For more information about financially sustainable schools resources, please visit www.nais.org/go/finance.
- [Join](#) the FSS listserv

About NAIS’s FSS Leadership Series: Prepared for NAIS school leaders and their boards, each essay in the series explores areas and issues pertaining to financially sustainable schools and is designed to inform and generate discussion. Series editors: NAIS’s Amy Ahart, Jefferson Burnett, Myra McGovern, Corey McIntyre, Paul Miller, Jay Rapp, Amada Torres, Aaron Wachholz, and Debra Wilson.