



Role of the Zone/Metro Director

A political perspective

Published 2001

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Introduction

So, you've just been elected as an ASBA Director. Congratulations. You can make a difference!! This booklet has been designed to enhance the orientation process for new directors. If you would like us to assign a "buddy" (mentor) from the board of directors please let us know.

Background

A democracy is the single best form of government in the world. We have a rich heritage of democratically elected representatives in this country and in this province. As an ASBA director, you have been chosen by your electorate as a trustee, and by your peers as their representative, through the political process. You are engaged in the essential work of a democratic society – serving in a public office that by its very essence is political. You are a politician.

We all tend to look at life through different lenses and sometimes we will even choose different lenses for ourselves for different occasions.

Lee G. Bolman and Terrance E. Deal in the book "*Reframing Organizations*" assert that any organization is an "alive and screaming" political arena that houses a complex variety of individual and group interests. The authors summarize the political lens or frame as follows:

1. Organizations are *coalitions* composed of varied individuals and interest groups (for example, hierarchical levels, departments, professional groups, gender and ethnic subgroups)
2. There are *enduring differences* among individuals and groups in their values, preferences, beliefs, information, and perceptions of reality. Such differences change slowly, if at all
3. Most of the important decisions in organizations involve the *allocation of scarce resources*: they are decisions about who gets what
4. Because of scarce resources and enduring differences, *conflict* is central to organizational dynamics, and *power* is the most important resource
5. Organizational goals and decisions emerge from bargaining, negotiation, and jockeying for position among members of different coalitions

Politics cannot be eliminated in organizations but participants can learn to understand and manage the political process. Participants can also learn to exercise political activity in a positive manner.

In "*The Empowered Manager*", Peter Block defines politics as the exchange of power. This goes hand in hand with empowerment. Block states: "We empower ourselves by discovering a positive way of being political."

The actual pattern of decisions in any organization can appear to be irrational compared to the public statements it makes. That is to be expected in a context of divergent interest groups, with a multiplicity of goals, many of which are in conflict with one another. From a political perspective, conflict is not necessarily a problem or a sign that something is amiss in the organization. However, there is clearly a need for both organizations and individuals to develop constructive and positive ways to master organizational politics. The question is not whether organizations will have politics but what kind of politics. Politics can be the vehicle for achieving very noble purposes.

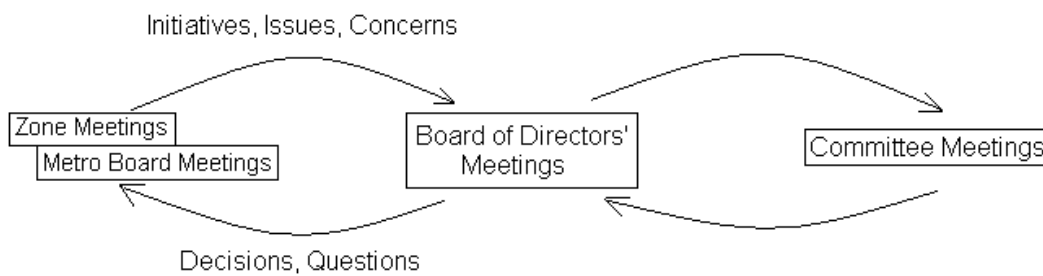
The board of directors consists of the president, vice-president, six zone and four metro directors. These members represent the views and perspectives of the entire province. They will have varying interests and personalities. There may, in fact, be enduring differences.

In *“Becoming a Better Board Member,”* published by the National School Boards Association, the authors include this quotation, from a South Carolina trustee:

“Board members must be compromisers. We’re policy makers, and that is what a politician is. We have to relate our policies and our intent in two-way communication.”

An article entitled *“Owl, Fox, Donkey or Sheep: Political Skills for Leaders,”* includes a quadrant with axes of integrity and political astuteness. The author attributes the adjectives wise, clever, inept and innocent to each of the animals in the quadrant. There may be some of each of these animals at work somewhere in any organization at any point in time. The author goes on to say there is much wisdom for a politician to use an approach which combines the qualities of integrity and political astuteness. Sound policy developed in a consultative manner is the single most effective way for an organization to ensure its leaders act with integrity in a politically responsive way.

A focus on policy as the driver of our organization and open, full, and honest two-way communication will allow our board of directors to operate in constructive and positive ways to achieve very noble purposes. As outlined in the ASBA’s *“Importance of Zones”* document, the association relies on the zone structure to carry out critical work and to monitor “grassroots” involvement thereby shaping policy and guiding the organization on a provincial level. The zone structure is used to enhance effective, two-way communication between ASBA and the membership. As an ASBA Director, you are the crucial link in gathering information from school boards, funneling it to the ASBA Board of Directors, and ensuring that information from the ASBA Board of Directors is shared with all school boards. You “bring things to” the table and you “take things from” the table. The cycle can be illustrated in the following way:



This cycle represents the usual mode of operation. However, the Board of Directors may find it necessary to determine policy positions between general meetings. This can be done on an emergent basis as an interim policy to be ratified by the general membership at the next scheduled meeting.

Expectations

Most expectations revolve around the board of directors’ meetings. There are things you do before, during and after these meetings, and there are things you always do.

1. Before the meeting
 - Be at/participate in Zone/Board meetings
 - Communicate board of directors’ decisions/positions to the Zone or Metro Board by using the meeting highlights
 - Write a Zone or Metro Board report in time to be included in the agenda package for each board of directors’ meeting (The Zone Director will write the report on the Zone meeting even though Metro Board Directors may also be in attendance)

2. During the meeting
 - Be there (all the time)
 - Listen
 - i. Let others tell you what they know
 - ii. Know that others will not always share your view
 - iii. Do your best to determine the will of the board
 - Talk
 - i. Tell the board about Zone/Metro initiatives, concerns or issues
 - ii. Let people know how you feel; say it like it is
 - iii. Ask questions for clarification when you are not sure
 - iv. Tell others what you know
 - v. Be objective and diplomatic when others' views are not your own
 - Help
 - i. Keep the board of directors on track
 - ii. Assist the board of directors in making a decision as soon as it can
 - iii. Inject humor when it's needed
 - iv. Support the president in moving forward
 - v. Focus on outcomes: What? Who for? How much?

3. After the meeting
 - Do your part to accomplish whatever was decided
 - Tell your constituents what was decided, why it was decided, and why what was decided was the right thing to do
 - Own the decisions (it's "us", not "they")

4. Always
 - Be classy
 - i. Represent the ASBA well
 - ii. Act in such a manner as to allow people to show you respect
 - iii. Speak carefully and thoughtfully – promote education
 - iv. *Be gentle and strong*
 - Be prepared
 - i. Know your policy handbook
 - ii. Read your meeting materials thoroughly
 - iii. Solicit input before the annual Strategic Planning Session
 - Help
 - i. When assigned, attend all committee meetings; be the leader when asked
 - ii. Go to CSBA annual general meeting when it's your turn
 - iii. Assist at General Meetings and forums as needed
 - iv. Look at the "big picture" painted by the whole association
 - v. Declare any possible pecuniary interest on items
 - Focus on outcomes (Strategic Plan, Ends Policies, Key Results)
 - i. Monitor the executive director's work
 - ii. Evaluate the board of director's performance
 - iii. Identify with members of the association; not with the staff
 - Remember your oath
 - *Be excited about making policy!!*

Benefits

There are a number of benefits to individuals who serve as a member of the board of directors:

- Your attendance at CSBA is sponsored every second year
- You can get involved in more sessions on trustee development
- You can improve your skills in a variety of situations
- You have the honour of representing your peers
- You increase your perspective
- You can advocate at the provincial level
- You have an opportunity to be part of a group which influences the direction of public education and ultimately benefit students, and;
- Your own board of trustees gets the advantage of continual updates on the provincial scene

Congratulations again! As an ASBA Director, you are now a part of the leadership group for the association. Best wishes as you begin this journey.