

# The Deadly Dozen: Common Board Member Blunders

Mistakes that are easy to make... but are hard to recover from.

By JANE KERSHNER

Are you guilty of any of the following common board member mistakes? In my years serving on a board, and as a board president, and then helping other boards as an NJSBA field service representative, I have seen first-hand how blunders by individual members can hamper the important work of school boards. The mistakes detailed below can destroy trust and teamwork, and present obstacles to the smooth functioning of your board.

As the school year gets underway, you should reflect on whether you sometimes make some of these mistakes – and then consider how you can change your behavior.

**Mistake No. 1. You're too impatient.** You're new (or not so new) to the board, and you want to see results – NOW. It's been five months since you were elected, and the district still hasn't overhauled its language arts curriculum or instituted those new programs you wanted. The board members who don't agree with you must lack intelligence. It's also annoying how much material you need to learn – you thought you'd be finished with the learning curve by now.

**The right way:** Understand that it takes at least a year to really learn the basics of school board service, and longer to master the art of boardsmanship. Try to understand what motivates others, and have patience with ideas that are different from your own. You don't automatically gain respect from your colleagues around the board room: you have to earn it. Remember, trust is an end product, not a starting point.

**Mistake 2. You behave poorly.** Believe it or not, there are board members who throw temper tantrums; use off-color language; throw things; threaten board members or the public; insult other board members, the superintendent, the staff or the public; and fall asleep during the public comment section of the meeting. Is this you?

**The right way:** Treat others the way you'd like to be treated. It sounds elementary, but it is timeless advice. You may be frustrated, which is often the cause when someone acts out, but if you are upset or angry, try consulting a more senior board member, who can be a mentor.

**Mistake No. 3. You publicly challenge the board after a vote.** A vote didn't come out the way you wanted it to, and you want to make sure the whole town knows that you didn't agree. The trouble is, when you publicly disown a vote, you are undermining the credibility of the board by criticizing the decision of the majority.

**The right way:** Fight hard for what you believe in, and then accept the will of the board and publicly support the decisions of the board.

**Mistake No. 4 You act like the 'Lone Ranger'** You take it upon yourself to speak for the board to the press or groups of citizens. You decide to investigate some school activities. You visit schools without following proper procedures. You bypass the chain of command.

**The right way:** Remember, you have no more authority than any other member of the public unless you are meeting as a board of education at a legally advertised meeting. You can't walk into schools or undertake an investigation any more than John Q. Public could. An added incentive to do the right thing: interfering in the operation of schools can earn you a complaint, investigation and possible dismissal from office from the School Ethics Commission.

**Mistake No. 5 You can't see the forest for the trees (you micromanage!).** You want to get involved in the smallest operational details in how the schools are run.

**The right way:** Leave administration to the administrators. That's what you're paying the professionals for. A board concentrates

on setting policy. Think macro- not micro.

**Mistake No. 6 You drop a bomb on the superintendent at a board meeting.** Nobody wants to be ambushed, and made to look stupid or foolish at a public meeting. Dropping bombs can destroy trust, and damages the superintendent-board working relationship. Note that this mistake can go both ways: one of the big mistakes superintendents can make is to drop a bomb on the board, and unexpectedly request the board take action on something.

**The right way:** Call the board president or superintendent if you are going to ask a difficult question at a board meeting to give them a chance to gather the necessary information to answer intelligently. Make sure your superintendent knows that he or she must provide adequate materials for a board to examine and consider well in advance of a request for action by the board. Make – and keep a “no surprises” pact with your administrators.

**Mistake No. 7 You vote along party lines, putting politics before children.** Your power and authority as a school board member should be put to one use: to make sure the children in your district receive a thorough and efficient education, and make sure your community schools are focused relentlessly on improving student achievement. If you have political ambitions, find another way to channel them.

**The right way:** Always put children above politics.

**Mistake No. 8 You become a “ball carrier” for others with hidden agendas.** Take care not to allow staff to manipulate you into taking their side against the superintendent in disputes. Similarly, don't allow friends or neighbors to influence how you look at an issue.

**The right way:** Listen to your conscience, study an issue until you understand it

(regardless of who is supporting the motion) and vote accordingly. When others come to you with the hope that they can detour around administrators, firmly insist they follow the chain of command in a district. Here's a statement to memorize when someone wants you to take matters into your own hands: "This problem could end up requiring board action, and if I am involved in it at this level, I will be unable to act on it as a member of the board because it could be a violation of due process. You really need to go through the proper channels."

**Mistake No. 9 You speak about confidential issues.** "Loose lips" happens most often when a board member simply doesn't *think* before speaking. A neighbor asks why a teacher wasn't given tenure, or how the negotiations with an employee union are going, and a board member shares too much information. The only appropriate time to talk about topics such as personnel matters (including negotiations), student matters, or pending litigation is in a closed board executive session.

**The right way:** Never discuss personnel or student matters – or anything discussed in executive session – with members of the public. Learn your responsibilities to keep confidences under the Code of Ethics.

**Mistake No. 10 You consider staff "the enemy."** If you find yourself thinking (or saying) things like "they're just the staff," "that's why they get paid the big bucks;" or "we have way-y-y too many administrators," ask yourself if you've begun thinking of the school district staff as the enemy, rather than as partners in the education of your community's children.

**The right way:** Respect the professionalism of your administrators and teachers. If there are problems with specific individuals, deal with those problems individually, but don't assume that all staff members are incompetent or under-performing.

**Mistake No. 11 You ignore policy.** You don't refer to policy when making decisions, you overturn board policies on a regular basis, or you don't hold the board, the superintendent or the staff to the policy manual.

**The right way:** Consider that your policy manual is law, that policy should be adhered to, and remember that you should never change policy in the middle of a crisis. Here's an analogy for you: A policy manual is to a district's smooth operation as a keel is to the smooth sailing of a boat. The keel functions as the boat's structure on which all else depends; it can prevent a boat from blowing sideways.

**Mistake No. 12 You put the board above family and business.** This mistake sounds a little counterintuitive. After all, wouldn't spending more time on board business make you a better board member? The trouble is, experienced board members make good board members, and if you "burn out" by overcommitting, you're not going to stay on a board long enough to have an impact and use your knowledge and influence to help your community.

**The right way:** Strive for balance in all responsibilities and obligations. **sl**

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