

A Brief Roadmap for Board And Administration Collaboration When Dealing With An Independent School Crisis

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The difference between success or failure when an independent school deals with a crisis may be determined by whether the administration and board are able to work collaboratively. The greater the crisis, the greater the stressors will be on the relationship between the two. Advance planning is critical. A crisis is not a time to find out what works and what does not.

Agree on roles, guiding principles and information sharing

Prior to a crisis, it is critical that administrators and board members reach agreement on three key organizational dynamics: respective roles; guiding principles; and information sharing. Although each dynamic could be the topic for a lengthy discussion, I will address each one only briefly. The board and the administration have different roles. In a crisis, both roles need to be addressed. The board's role is governance. It sets the school's mission, vision and values, for which it provides oversight exercised through inquiry. The administration's role is management. This involves conducting the school's operations, carrying out strategy and shaping its culture. The guiding principles should support the school's mission, vision and values. I propose that in a crisis school leaders should strive for, to the extent possible, a balance of transparency, accountability and equity. The board and the administration must share significant information with each other sufficiently to maintain trust. This involves having clear expectations about not only what is shared, but also about when and with whom it is shared.

Establish the crisis response working structure and teams

After reaching agreement on these key factors, the administration and the board should establish the working structure for responding to a crisis. In this age of instant electronic communications, rapid action in a crisis is a necessity. Although the administration is primarily responsible for managing the crisis, issues are likely to arise that will fall in the board's realm of responsibility. Therefore, a hybrid approach to crisis response is needed through which the administration can quickly execute its decisions with board support. The board will need a sub-group capable of working effectively with an administrative crisis response team. A key member of this group will be the board's chair. Some boards utilize members of the board's Executive Committee. Others create an ad-hoc special committee. Members are likely to be selected based on skills, personality and availability. The size of such groups varies, but it is crucial that the group is able to act quickly when needed. The board committee is designed to support and empower the administration's crisis response team by addressing fiduciary, strategic and ethical issues that might arise. The administrative crisis response team will also need to be carefully selected. In

particular, the crisis team should include an administrator who has the time, skills and personality to take a lead role in implementing key actions.

Schools mostly likely will require outside assistance from specialists to supplement their existing resources. Depending on circumstances, these supporting professionals may include legal, crisis communications, investigation, mental health, and insurance specialists. The time to research potential specialists and interview them is in advance of a crisis. Too many schools have regretted decisions about consultants made in the haste of responding to a crisis.

Determine the crisis response processes

Once the crisis response team is in place, it should establish working procedures. One of its first tasks is to agree on a decision making process. It is important to determine which decisions will require board input or approval and how that input or approval will be obtained. Processes for internal communications should be established. These will include routine and urgent communications within the crisis response team and within the board. Consideration should be given to protecting, to the extent possible, sensitive information by means of legal privilege. Processes for external communications will also need to be established. External communications will include communications with the authorities, the school community, and traditional and social media.

Memorialize the crisis response plan and conduct training

When the crisis response team and the working procedures are in place, they can be summarized in a crisis plan. However, no plan can anticipate all contingencies. And even the best plan will not be helpful if it is not well implemented. Invariably, a crisis will put stress on roles, structures and procedures. Therefore, it is crucial for the crisis response team and the Board to train for a crisis. A table top exercise, in which a crisis scenario plays out, is a useful exercise for preparing a crisis response team and a board subcommittee. In responding to each of the scenes in the training scenario, the participants can practice identifying issues, making decisions, and communicating internally and externally.

Implement the crisis response plan

When a crisis occurs, certain steps should happen quickly and routinely. Mandated reports should be made as soon as they are required. Any needed safety measures should be implemented. The full board should be notified. The response team and board special or subcommittee should be activated and the appropriate supporting consultants should be engaged. The crisis response team should prepare a plan and a strategy which will each evolve as events unfold. The team should strive to be as pro-active as possible and to stay on the moral high ground.

The head of school should delegate as much as possible to preserve energy and not lose focus on other significant school activities. It is important to utilize the strengths of team members and consultants. It is useful to create and monitor action lists. The action plan should continually be revisited and revised.

Focus on effective communication

Effective communication is crucial to crisis management. Good communication is fundamental to building and maintaining trust at all levels. Trust is essential to effective teamwork. Regular update meetings and calls should be scheduled within the team and with the subcommittee of the board. Responsibility for various communications should be delegated. Urgent information should be shared expeditiously by the chair with the entire board so that no one in a position of responsibility feels uninformed or blind-sided. It is also important to stay in touch with the authorities. The various constituencies of the school community should be kept informed, as appropriate.

Conduct after-event reviews

Crises do not always have a clear ending point. When sufficient time has passed, conduct an after-event review. Determine what worked and what can be improved. Inform the board of the conclusions. Adjust policies, procedures and team members accordingly. Update the crisis response plan. Then begin the training and preparation process all over again. When it comes to crisis response, you cannot rest on your laurels.

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