



15 Que faut-il pour exceller à la présidence?

THE CHAIR AS SPOKESPERSON MEDIA RELATIONS AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Communication works for those who work at it.

JOHN POWELL

Effective communication is a vital leadership trait and a skill that will improve with practice. A good leader attends to the ideas and suggestions of others by listening, questioning, analyzing and observing effectively. Modelling is an important communication skill – actions speak louder than words. The board chair often represents or speaks for the board and strong communication and presentation skills are essential.

A board must engage in effective communication with school staff, students and their families, community members and others. Although individual trustees regularly communicate with their constituents, the chair or a designate is assigned the responsibility of speaker on behalf of the board as a whole about the decisions of the board. Whether or not the chair agrees with these decisions, he or she must communicate them clearly and in a positive light. As a matter of good public relations, some boards find it helpful to produce a summary of board decisions soon after the meeting to distribute to trustees, board staff, parents, the media and the public. Boards usually post this summary on their website.

Establishing good relations with the media is another important part of the role of a board chair. Since most people learn a great deal of what they know about schools and about the broader issues of public policy through the media, the board of trustees should ensure that their local media have the information they need to present a balanced picture of public education and the societal issues boards are dealing with. In most cases, the chair is the person who represents the board to the public and the media unless otherwise determined.

As the “voice” and “face” of the board, it is important to be well versed in the decisions of the board and to anticipate questions that might be asked by members of the public or the press. Consulting with the vice-chair, other board members and/or the director may be a helpful preparation strategy. Saying “no

comment at this time” is a valid way to buy time to investigate an issue further before commenting public.

See also: Good Governance Guide, Chapter 12 at:

<http://cge.ontarioschooltrustees.org/en/read/communications-and-media-relations>

TIPS ON DEALING WITH THE PUBLIC AT BOARD MEETINGS

- Place controversial issues early on the agenda
- Have sufficient copies of the agenda and summary reports for the public
- Show you are listening by leaning forward and maintaining eye contact.
- Avoid showing impatience by drumming your fingers or a pencil on the table.
- Take notes sparingly. Appearing to write down every word may intimidate the speaker
- Never chat with staff or colleagues while a member of the public is speaking
- If possible, respond to each speaker by name
- Use language the public can understand – avoid jargon
- Never argue or engage the public in debate
- Avoid sarcasm or “in jokes”
- Respect the public and the public will respect you.