Conducting Highly Effective Board Meetings

By \*Randy L. Russell, Ph.D.

When conducting any meeting, the leaders and attendees should always be clear about three things: the what, the why and the how. These three items are extremely important for any successful organization to conduct an effective meeting. These three items, when focused around serving the school community, are the foundation for knowing *what* we are doing, *why* we are doing it, and *how* we will do it to better serve our students, our staff, our parents, and our community.

Knowing what we are doing in a school board meeting is like having a good lesson plan or a good game plan to help staff and students be successful. We always provide the school board agenda several days in advance to school board members so they can review the agenda and call before the board meeting if they have specific questions about an agenda item. We also conduct a pre-board meeting prior to the board meeting to review the agenda in advance, with both the school board chairperson and a rotating school board member in attendance, so we can “walk through” the agenda, answer any questions, and prepare for the meeting. This is very similar to having a dress rehearsal for a drama presentation, music concert, or football game and helps us stay accountable to our “No Surprises” commitment to one another.

For the Freeman School Board, board members know exactly why they are on the school board and why we conduct our school board meetings – to serve our community by making decisions that are always in the best interests of our students. The board’s why – their purpose – is to serve students. Therefore, our meetings are focused on why we are all in education – to support our students so they can be successful.

When we stay focused on our students, and work collaboratively as one team, the school board and superintendent role model teamwork, professionalism, and a unified force for our students, staff and parents. We are a part of one team – and *yes* while there are disagreements, differences of opinions, and everyone always gets their say, yet don’t always get their way – and this collaboration and cooperation are at the center of our school district. This is why we stay focused on our TEAM – Together Everyone Achieves More for our students.

To ensure effective meetings, everyone must know their role and their responsibility. This includes students, staff, parents, community members, the media and most importantly the school board. In Freeman, we do several things we feel help maximize conducting a highly effective board meeting. First, we have all board members serve as the board chairperson for two years, after first serving as the vice chairperson. This helps with consistency and continuity to continually grow each board member as a part of the team. Second, we have the board chairperson sit right next to the superintendent so we can help one another. Even though this a meeting for the school board conducted in public, I’m there as the superintendent to help support the board chairperson during the meeting, as well as before and after the public meeting. Finally, we have clear expectations for our Leadership Team – directors and principals – as well as our staff and students who may be presenting for the school board or attending the meeting. Throughout the meeting, and before any public comments, our school board, superintendent, staff and our students have all modeled the appropriate standards and behaviors for our parents, the public and the media.

The Freeman School Board does an excellent job of managing public input, managing their time, and accommodating the media during their school board meeting. We all believe public access and input is vital to our communication, collaborative partnerships, transparency and accountability with and to our stakeholders. Public comment takes place on our agenda after the consent agenda, student reports/presentations, and Leadership Team and Superintendent reports. This allows for the public, and the media, to hear about and learn what is happening across the school district through the eyes and voices of our students and staff.

If someone makes a public comment, the school board and superintendent are there to listen and learn, with no judgement. Although no action is taken and often there is no specific response to public comments, there is always an opportunity to thank the student, staff member, parent or community member for taking the time to attend the meeting and share their thoughts with us.

The media is there to do their job and we can help them do their job better by providing them with accurate and timely information. In working with the media, a story will be told one way or another. The question to be considered is, is it better for us to tell our story or let someone else tell our story? We believe it is better for us to tell our story. We take a positive and proactive approach, working collaboratively with the media to tell our story.

Conducting a highly effective school board meeting requires a team effort. Following the three items above – the what, the why and the how - will help keep your team focused on the important aspects which need to be discussed and decided on to serve your students and community.

\*Dr. Randy L. Russell is the Superintendent of the Freeman School District in Rockford, WA and is the President of RLR Leadership Consulting. He can be reached at rrussell@freemansd.org. Follow him at @RandyLRussell24.