

# Communications Protocols for the Board and the Staff

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# Introduction

- Guidelines to assist Special District Board of Directors and General Managers with Communicating with Staff.
  - Protocols
  - Legalities
  - Practical Advice

# Districts and the Interplay Between the:

- Board
- General Manager
- Staff
- Public

# Board of Directors

- The Board's role is to carry out the mission of the District.
- The mission is achieved by providing good customer service to District constituents using best and highest ethics.

# General Manager

- The Administrator/General Manager is the Chief Executive Officer of the District.
- Typically appointed by the Board and subject to the control of the Board.
- Responsible for overseeing day to day operations of the District.

# Staff

- Perform the day to day duties, e.g., accounting, billing, maintenance, payroll.
- Deals with the public, performs all public services, etc.
- Carries out the Board's directions.
- Reports to the General Manager.

# Public

- The public consists of residents or commercial businesses within the district.
- The residents of the District elect the members who serve on the Board.
- Like the Board, General Manager and Staff, the Public has certain (constitutional) rights *vis a vis* the District.

# Relationship Between the Board, General Manager and Staff

- The Board's job is to further the purpose or mission of the District by setting and achieving goals.
- General Manager and Staff are responsible for carrying out the Board's plans in order to achieve goals.
- Thus, all 3 branches are working together towards one common purpose which is to further the mission of the District.

# Effect of the Public on the Relationship Between the Board, General Manager and Staff

# The Public's Perception of the Board

- Typically held accountable by the public for any problems they encounter within the District.
- Views the Board as the de facto CEO of the district or the “ultimate boss.”
- Expects the Board to redress their grievances.
- Power to vote Board member out of office.

# Conflict Created by Public's Perception of the Board

- It is not the Board's responsibility or authority to address the public's concerns.
- Board should look to the General Manager for answers.
- Puts pressure on the General Manager who may, in turn, put pressure on the staff.
- Employees may feel that they are being blamed or put in the position of having to accept blame.

# Communication Is Important to Further Goals of District and Avoid Misunderstanding

# Tips for Improving Communication

- The General Manager's conduct is the foundation of good communication.

Role Model Good Communication!

Role Models Good Management!

# Tips for Improving Communication with the Board

- Get a feel for the Board's interest.
- Meet with Department Heads regularly to determine what is coming up/get information.
- Attend community meetings to determine issues and concerns.

# Tips for Improving Communication with the Board

- Board does not like surprises.
- Talk to Board about possibilities.
- Keep open line of communication.
  - Staff reports
  - News releases
  - Memos
  - Committee Meetings

# What is Proper Board Conduct?

- Loyalty to mission of the District that is free from loyalties to others, including each individual member's personal interest as a consumer.
- Avoid conflicts of interest.
- Act ethically.

# What is Proper Board Conduct?

- Respect confidentiality when appropriate.
- “Act” in a unified manner.
- Treat differences of opinion in a respectful manner.
- Ensure Board/required employees attend ethics training.

# Proper Board Conduct Results in the Following:

- Prevents division among the Board which may cause the staff to “choose sides.”
- Sets an example of how the Staff should conduct themselves.
- Provides leadership for the Staff.
- Minimized “end runs” around the General Manager.

# Tips for Improving Communication

1. Implement well defined roles for the Board, General Manager and each employee.
2. Define expectations.
3. Create an environment of trust and candor.
4. Create an environment of mutual respect, which should apply to all levels of employees.
5. Create an environment of inclusiveness.

# Methods to Achieving Better Communication

- Adopt a Policy Regulating Board/Staff Relations.
  - Staff should direct all communications to General Manager.
  - Prohibit direct interaction between Board and Staff?
  - Consider providing an avenue for staff to pursue grievances relating to General Manager?

# Methods to Achieving Better Communication

- Conduct meetings with staff (General Managers forum).
- Make sure managers meet with staff.
- Use intranet resources (media releases, protocols).
- Provide update of major issues to staff.

# Reasons Board Should Limit Communications With Staff

1. Board members are meant to act as part of the Board, not individually.
2. Legislative immunity is limited.
3. Potential liability for...
  - Invasion of privacy.
  - Unfair labor practice.
  - Retaliation.
  - Violating staff' s free speech rights.

# Reasons Board Should Limit Communications With Staff

4. Undermine Board neutrality.
5. Inadvertent admissions.
6. Misquotation of comments.
7. Inefficient use of Board time.
8. It is not the Board's job.

1. Refrain from doing so unless it is a part of one's obligation to the District.
2. Proceed as part of a properly convened Board meeting, not individually.
3. Communication with staff should be achieved through the General Manager or another appropriate District employee designated to interact with the staff.
4. Comply with the Brown Act.
5. Consult with legal counsel.

# Benefits of Evaluating the General Manager

- Confirms understanding of job description.
- Confirms understanding of priorities.
- Best opportunity for frank discussion about accomplishments, failures, the status of the district, goals, objectives, and the match between the District and the General Manager.
- May provide a legal defense.

# Areas for Review

- Specific goals and objectives.
- Specific areas for improvement.
- Standard Areas for Review:
  - Operations
  - Fiscal
  - Personnel
  - Public Relations
  - Leadership and Decision-making
  - Board Relations

# Practical Advice

- Communication
  - Informal
  - Formal
- Establish and Enforce Clear Policies, Processes and Protocols.
- Invite and Embrace Feedback, Evaluations and Goal Setting.
- Effectively Utilize Committees.
- Minimize Surprises.