



A Psychologist and Executive Coach Shares The Secrets to a Good Board-Superintendent Marriage

By John Blattner, Ph.D.

Any good marriage, partnership or relationship takes a great deal of effort and work. Superintendents and boards who work together to develop a strong partnership will likely experience a positive and mutually productive relationship.

Marriages often start with a honeymoon, when both partners are excited, interested and looking to the future. The possibilities can seem endless. It's a time when the couple is getting to know each other and developing and defining each other's roles and expectations. But what happens when the idyllic honeymoon period is over? A good marriage requires a strong foundation and continued work to keep it strong. The same holds true for a healthy board-superintendent relationship.

School leadership teams, like married couples, commit to uphold their vows for better or worse. Sometimes it's not an easy task, and it can put a strain on even the best marriages. Severe challenges to superintendents and boards are cropping up daily at both the state and national levels. Many districts must manage significant reductions in revenue, and, as a result, are being forced to close schools, reduce teachers, cut many programs and increase class sizes. There is also national concern about core curriculum issues and how federal influence is affecting the state and local districts. These tough issues aren't going away any time soon, and new ones are sure to arise on their heels.

So how is the board-superintendent union to manage these critical and dynamic issues without winding up in divorce court? As with a good marriage, they will need to learn, grow, and work diligently to develop and maintain an effective and productive relationship. This will require openness to change and the ability to improve their interpersonal skills as a team. They must establish clarity in their roles and use that to define how they will work together. Leadership and team skills are extremely important - especially as stress levels increase.

The superintendent may benefit from re-assessing his or her leadership style and how that style could improve, since the demands on superintendents have increased at a greater rate than ever before. Getting a baseline reading of his or her leadership style may enable the superintendent to see that altering that style may actually facilitate greater cooperation, not only with the board, but also with the staff. These insights may make the superintendent more resilient when leading in today's complex public education landscape.

Board members may also need to understand how their positive or negative interactions as a board affect the entire

leadership team. Understanding board member dynamics - how they interact as individuals and as a group - is necessary for the team to function as optimally as possible. As in marriages, recognition and acceptance of different styles of handling conflict is extremely critical to finding the best way to come to consensus.

Recognizing the issues facing superintendents and boards, how can these two groups continue to be open, collaborative, cooperative, and ultimately, productive? As with a developing marriage, the board-superintendent relationship must continually address the dynamic forces between them. They must continue to promote an atmosphere of trust where even highly emotionally charged issues can be discussed openly and constructively. When disruptive and unproductive behavior and reactions arise, they must be managed and contained. Understanding the origin of their frustrations can help members of the leadership team create ways to manage those sometimes disruptive emotions and turn them into positive interactions. This means working toward a greater understanding of each other's styles and learning to deal with interpersonal conflict so differences do not derail the business of the board and district.

The challenge for both parties is taking the time to assess and create a plan to address these issues head on. Those that make this a priority and continue to work on building a solid foundation long after the honeymoon is over prosper, and those who don't may experience greater frustration, anger and overall dysfunction that could lead to a failure to move the district's goals forward.

During these particularly difficult times, it is vital that boards and superintendents not let the stress and their differences create a rupture and fracture healthy relating. Instead, they must work towards greater emotional resilience, individually and as a leadership team, as they face very challenging and very emotional decisions for their districts. ■

About the writer: For the past 30 years, John Blattner, Ph.D., has assisted CEOs, superintendents, presidents, senior executives and organizations to manage change and develop their individual and organizational strengths. A licensed psychologist, he is currently a managing partner with Arizona-based Estrella Partners Group, and specializes in executive coaching, leadership development, organizational culture assessment, executive assessment, staff development and strategic planning for national and international organizations.