Educational Directions Incorporated
The Trusted Authority for Advancing School Leadership

THE Trustee's LETTER

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Relevance, Part Two: Concentrating on the "Main Thing"

In these times of fast-paced change and uncertainty, relevance becomes an important question for many organizations, as they consider their future, and a vitally important point for boards to reflect upon. With leadership transitions, changing demographics, and economic and political considerations constantly on the front page and on our minds, have we, as board members, taken the time to "make sure the main thing is the main thing"?

All too often, boards focus on the financial aspects of our schools, which are among our primary obligations. Perhaps we're considering the next capital campaign for endowment or the new building that will take our school to "the next level."

In acquitting ourselves of this important obligation, we also need to remind ourselves that, as members of our school's board of trustees, our first responsibility is service to others, or servant leadership. As trustees, we have been appointed to represent the community in our schools and our schools in the community. In this role, we are serving the mission of the school. And, while missions may vary, our purpose in independent schools does not.

That purpose is to touch the future through the education of our children today. Our children, the students in our schools, are "the main thing"—the reason we exist. Has our board taken the time, during meetings, to invite in and truly listen to our students, together with their teachers and parents—to hear first-hand how programs and policies are influencing their future?

It is important to listen to others' perspectives at a board meeting, rather than to assume that we understand each issue through our own experience or that of our children and their friends. Multiple perspectives are important, and even more vital is giving voice to those perspectives in a formal setting, such as a board meeting, where constituents will feel they are heard.

Although we might not be able to predict what we will hear, or see, we will get a different perspective. More often than not, it will be messy and full of uncertainty, but it will be authentic and it will come from those who live and breathe the mission and programs of the school every day. Through the stories of the school and the students and faculty we serve, we gain a deeper appreciation for "mission moments" and our successes and opportunities for improvement.

Only through inclusive, open communication can we be truly relevant, thus insuring that "the main thing *is* the main thing."

No More Board Books!

That's right, none whatsoever, announces Linda Dixon, secretary of the corporation of Tufts University, in Medford, Massachusetts ("Doing Board Business on the Web," *Board Member*, March/April 2008).

When this large university board of trustees meets, its members require reams of information. Did we say *reams*? Well, actually, that term—traditionally connoting lots of stuff—proves to be a total anachronism in this context.

In fact, it was producing, printing, collating, and mailing all those paper documents that was costing $2,500 a crack, not to mention the junior staff person consigned to three full days of putting it all together. Far too expensive, decided Ms. Dixon in the year 2000.

She proposed her revolutionary idea of going digital to the university president and the board chair, got their support, and surveyed the trustees. All owned a computer; 82 percent had access to technical support; and 90 percent declared themselves comfortable with e-mail and the Internet.

> ***"The Web site engages all trustees across all the issues at the same time. Before, we saw information piecemeal. Now, everyone has access to everything. We are better informed and more engaged."***

Unfortunately for this progressive group, the university IT department wasn't there yet, so Ms. Dixon started small—mailing out sample CD-ROMs over the summer for trustees to practice on. In October, the first live set went out—each in its own tiny envelope—containing all the documents that had previously been printed and shipped in great big FedEx boxes. Within one year, four trustees who had initially requested to stay with paper saw the folly of their ways and came aboard.

Four years later, in 2004, the IT crew was ready with two Web sites. The public site, linked to the newly redesigned university Web site, contained such general information as by-laws, committee descriptions and membership lists, and photos and bios of those trustees who had given permission. The private Web site, requiring a password, contained "a vast resource that goes far beyond delivering meeting documents": educational articles on admissions, fundraising, diversity; "trustees in the news"; archives; contact address lists; calendars and agendas; and a section on feedback.

In preparation for board meetings, trustees can choose to print out only those documents they need and want, depending on each individual's committee assignment(s) and role(s). Between meetings, everyone can stay informed without being weighed down by all that paper.

Are there occasional glitches? To be sure. Most are repaired quickly. The benefits, however, have proven to extend far beyond the budgetary savings. "The Web site engages all trustees across all the issues at the same time," observed one satisfied customer. "Before, we saw information piecemeal. Now, everyone has access to everything. We are better informed and more engaged."

Music to Ms. Dixon's ears: "It's feedback like this that reaffirms our drive to keep improving this resource."

Oh yes, and trustees' briefcases are pounds lighter.

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Giving IT a Seat at the Table

A few large corporations have integrated their information technology departments into their overall decisionmaking process, achieving significant advantage over their competitors. But most organizations are not tapping this resource, maintain Southern Methodist University technology professor Amit Basu and management consultant Chip Jarnagin, in "How To Tap IT's Hidden Potential," *Wall Street Journal*, March 10. Too often, there exists a barrier in the form of a firmly entrenched glass wall.

The reasons are not hard to discover. The department is usually in the basement where few people venture, and its occupants tend to dress funny, are inclined to be territorial, and speak a bit-laden techno-language that is truly "lost in translation." More importantly, most CEOs view the operation as a money pit with ever-increasing demands for new equipment and software, each with accompanying problems. The goal becomes, therefore, merely to contain costs.

To utilize the true potential of information technology, these authors provide seven organizational pointers.

1. Start with a commitment to IT literacy in the board room, the front office, and departments.
2. Hire an IT director who understands interrelatedness as much as, if not more than, the actual technology.
3. Include a stint in the IT department as part of every management training program, and provide management training to the IT staff.
4. Create a demand for IT solutions, with managers' knowledge of information security, for example, as mandatory as understanding marketing or finance.
5. Make sure that every department has at least one IT liaison and the IT staff fully understands its interdependence with the entire organization.
6. Rationalize IT spending, which will require a clearer understanding of the technology and its impact throughout the organization.
7. Create an IT portfolio that evaluates risks and returns, much like an investment portfolio.

With IT seated at the table as an integral part of the decisionmaking process, instead of outsourced in desperation, "the glass wall will be shattered, and IT's full value to the organization can be realized."

IN THIS CORNER

Kent Starts Early

ALTHOUGH THE RED BARN sitting in a grassy southern New England meadow surrounded by shade trees has been designed to resemble its rural neighbors, the Kent Early Learning Center of **Kent School**, in Connecticut (Coed Boarding and Day, 575 students grades 9 - 12), houses a very different population.

When it opened in 1998, the Early Learning Center initially served 22 infants, toddlers, and preschoolers—mostly children of Kent employees and a few neighbors. Since then, the enrollment has grown to 27, with a teacher-student ratio of 1:10 for toddlers and preschoolers; 1:4 for infants. The facility contains separate rooms for each age group, separate crib space for infant rest times, a full kitchen, a welcoming lobby, and a fenced-in playground.

Writing about the Center's first decade in the *Kent Quarterly*, Fall/Winter 2007-2008, rector and headmaster Richardson W. Schell '69 explains that the center's purpose is to "provide quality care and education for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers . . . for Kent School families and the surrounding community." He also includes several testimonials.

Counselor Amy Raskin appreciates having "such a well-run, organized, clean, educational, supportive, bright day care center where we can bring our children," and science teacher Michael Benjamin's daughters "arrived at kindergarten with a good foundation in basic reading and counting skills."

What may interest many independent schools, especially those endeavoring to attract and retain talented young teachers, are the sentiments of two others. French teacher Kristin Benjamin says, "I could not have been a full-time faculty member without knowing that my children were happy and well cared for." Admissions officer Amy Ober seconds that: "It is a benefit that gives me peace of mind and puts Kent at the top of my list as the perfect boarding school in which to raise children."

Reforming the Governance Structure

When the executive committee does all the work—in effect, becoming a mini-board, the rest of the board does little or nothing. This dysfunctional structure causes three fatal problems, which university trustee emeritus and board education consultant E. B. Wilson addresses in "Look First at the Executive Committee," *Trusteeship*, March/April 2008.

First, the executive committee usurps the roles of other committees, the full board, and, eventually, the president and administration. The other trustees, cast as "bystanders who nod their heads in passive acquiescence," become discouraged, and so board turnover is high. Worst of all, the essential board-president partnership never develops. Missing is a balanced board structure and governance relationship.

"The answer is to construct a governance model," writes Mr. Wilson, "and then put in place over time the building blocks of a higher-performing board."

1. Limit and define the executive committee, which should hold extra, unscheduled meetings only in unanticipated emergencies that can't wait.

2. Move from three full-board meetings a year to four, one of which might be a two-day summer retreat.

3. Strengthen the committee on trustees ("where your best people belong") and charge this group with creating "a master plan of board composition that anticipates all of the professional disciplines and resources that the board requires to exercise constructive and participatory oversight of strategic process made under the institutional leadership of the president."

4. Utilizing this plan, review the board's committee structure, eliminate non-strategic committees, add committees to fill essential governance gaps, and clearly define each committee's mission. Each committee should set annual goals and objectives, evaluating performance at the end of every year.

5. Create a strategic plan, the "glue" that holds this governance structure together.

6. Express two "non-negotiable expectations" of the president: a) articulation of "an inspiring, challenging, strategic vision" accompanied by a plan that has full board support or ownership; and b) stated annual goals and objectives for realizing the plan, which establish a basis for the president's performance assessment.

"Governance reform is a conscious decision."

7. Design thematic agendas for full-board meetings of three hours, maximum: "faculty and student life in the fall, budgeting and financial strategy in the winter, and strategic assessments in the spring." One month before the meeting, send out the agenda, which should include explanations of issues to be decided, so that trustees understand the importance of their participation to the institution's strategic future. Consider this order:
   - A brief campus update
   - Discussion of two or three topics to be decided, allotting time for all to be heard
   - Short committee updates on progress toward goals and objectives
   - Discussion of "board housekeeping"
   - Break for executive session

The new structure is best approached though a board retreat. "Governance reform is a conscious decision. Be well prepared to sell the board on the principal outcomes but be flexible as to implementation. Create ownership for both the rationales and the results."

After everyone is convinced, a genuine partnership between the board and the president can develop. "The best way to create that partnership is for the committees of the board to adopt the president's goals and objectives as their own." Each committee takes on only those responsibilities that are aligned with its stated mission and develops a plan to accomplish them. One by one, each of these plans should result in a recommendation that comes before the full board to be discussed, debated, and decided with every trustee participating.

If the executive committee is getting in the way of full board participation and a true board-president partnership, Mr. Wilson advises taking the "first steps toward transformation of governance. There will be unintended consequences along the way, some of them painful. But the outcomes from high performance will be the ultimate reward."

Branding by the Numbers

Branding, a proactive enterprise in the corporate world, is too often a passive endeavor in nonprofits, posits fundraising consultant Joel Zimmerman in “The Nonprofit Branding Exercise,” *Nonprofit World*, January/February 2008. Rarely does this result in a unique brand.

And yet, “Nearly every nonprofit competes with others whose mission is similar. For many, it’s their brand that makes their appeal for attention and funds successful. . . . Rather than being branded passively, you should actively engineer your brand.”

For nonprofits ready to try this on their own, Mr. Zimmerman recommends researching “the environment in which your nonprofit operates. What other organizations are in your work space? What are their brands? What media are they using?”

With the lay of the land established, it’s now safe to look inward and create the basis for a branding game plan through three steps: assembling the “right people,” getting a facilitator, and completing his worksheet, which contains 11 all-inclusive points.

1. Branding concept
2. Defining the target audience for this
3. The need being fulfilled
4. Services you provide to deserve this brand
5. Evidence of these services
6. The organization’s main message about this concept
7. Secondary messages
8. The organization’s positioning statement in relation to competitors: what makes us special, how we want to be characterized and identified
9. Collateral materials, such as proposals, brochures, logo, byline, ads, banners, Web pages, vision statement, stationery, etc.
10. The media for delivering this message
11. Strategies for strengthening the brand

Once established, it is essential to use the new brand consistently and to educate the community both about its importance to the mission and about each individual’s organizational role in relation to it. “Branding must be a verb, not just a noun. Do your brand. Make your branding concepts come alive in the marketplace, in exactly the ways you want them to.”

NEWSWORTHY

Changing Demographics Reported

THIS YEAR’S HIGH SCHOOL graduating class has hit a peak, with the numbers predicted to decline slowly, nationwide, until 2015, according to an analysis released in March by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (Wiche) and reported in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Elyse Ashburn, “Student Pool Is Expected To Dip and Diversify,” March 28).

As the high school population begins growing again in 2015, the proportionality of groups to one another is predicted to continue changing. “By 2022, almost half of all public high-school graduates will be members of minority groups—with Hispanics alone making up a quarter—according to the commission.” Many will be the first in their families to attend college. “In short, a growing number of would-be college students will be exactly those whom colleges have historically struggled to serve.”

Continued population shifts from former industrial areas to the Sunbelt are also forecast. As a result, Midwestern and Northeastern states will continue to see reductions in high school populations; Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Nevada, and Texas “will see phenomenal growth across all racial groups, but particularly Hispanic students.”

Colleges are already seeing a change. At St. Anselm College, in Manchester, N.H., high school inquiries are shifting; Lehigh University, in Bethlehem, Penn., plans to recruit more heavily in the Southwest; and Dartmouth College, in Hanover, N.H., is preparing to increase financial aid.

“The fact that the part of the population that is growing the fastest is the least well educated has created a sense of urgency around here,” said Texas higher education commissioner Raymund Paredes.

Re-engaging Alumni

Giving by alumni is down, notes development consultant Bill Jaques in "Slip Slidin' Away," *Team Work*, Spring 2008. Even the most successful colleges, universities, and independent schools have seen a 10-to-30 percent decrease in participation.

To help readers reverse this troubling trend, Mr. Jaques interviewed a representative sampling of his clients about their alumni fundraising, and he relates the information gained in five basic principles.

1. **Building Relationships**
   To accomplish this, **Noble and Greenough School** (Dedham, MA) focuses on the annual reunion program, which realizes a 50 percent or more participation. By involving volunteers in this year-long and many-faceted endeavor, Nobles finds that every prospective alumni donor is known personally to at least one staff member.
2. **Reinventing Programs**
   For alumni fundraisers at **Boston University**, generic class reunion activities are giving way to targeted events throughout the year, such as job and career networking. "Tugging at the heartstrings just doesn't cut it," said one administrator.
3. **Relentless Outreach**
   This has worked for **Belmont Hill School** (MA), where college students and recent graduates are being courted through campus visits during which staff members share meals with BHS alumni and bring them news of their school. Other schools are utilizing student calling programs, e-mail, Web sites, and challenge grants.
4. **Rethinking Communications**
   In addition to conveying the importance of "permanence, stability, tradition of excellence, etc.," alumni fundraisers must demonstrate the relevance of their case. **Trinity College** (Hartford, CT) has developed a new interactive Web site for this purpose, while the **Park School** (Brookline, MA) has enrolled in FaceBook.
5. **Dazzling Stewardship**
   Many schools and colleges are turning their attention to "loyalty donors," those who give each year, regardless of the amount. This includes an expanded program of increased contact from administrators, faculty, trustees, and students.

"Lest we forget," advises Mr. Jaques, "it is the institution-donor relationship we prize the most over the long term." Keeping this goal in mind enriches "the genuine meaning of giving and receiving."

Where the Heart Is

Learning that his son, a student at Wesleyan University, had taken on fundraising as a part-time job prompted University of Memphis journalism professor Bob Levey to observe the results of this learning experience, which proved to be pretty interesting ("What Potential Donors Want To Hear," *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, March 20). "Three months in, he has raised thousands of dollars. He has also demonstrated one of the best-known truths about fund raising—that it's all about relationships."

When cold-calling parents and alumni, "information is king." Reporting that a favorite 90s band is still on the campus center juke box, for example, usually guarantees positive results from recent graduates. Similarly, "if he can tell an older alumnus who's a lawyer that he too wants to be a lawyer, that alumnus will feel that maybe the future isn't destined to be a wreck."

With former soccer players, young Levey has found that if he "lets drop the fact that Wesleyan has been to the NCAA tournament two of the last three years, well, you can start the ka-chinging."

After listening to these war stories, Mr. Levey has two words of advice for the professional staff:

1. If another call is required, the same student who started the process should stay with it.
2. Given the capabilities of digital data bases, caller lists should focus on likely caller-donor connections, such as similar interests and experiences or personal relationships.

Most of all, he relays the wisdom his son has garnered from this experience. "What Allie has learned is that emotions drive the process harder than generic pleas or sermons about general excellence. Donors will not give because Wesleyan needs new Bunsen burners in the science lab or a higher ranking in *U.S. News & World Report*. They will give if their heartstrings are plucked by memories or current anecdotes from a current student."

Whatever profession this undergrad eventually chooses, his college fundraising experience has taught him that "human juice is what makes money flow."

Reeling 'Em In

Rather than being a chore, fundraising, for some, presents an opportunity and a challenge. For one university president, Thomas Powell of Mount St. Mary's University, in Emmitsville, Maryland, it's also a lot like trout fishing ("Hook, Line, and Sinker," *CASE Currents*, April 2008), and he works at it step by step. Here are some excerpts.

Prepare for the trip. Just as anglers assemble supplies and gear, fundraisers read about a donor's background and interests and rehearse their presentation of the case.

Know your knots. This means establishing and maintaining a strong bond with donors.

The line needs to be in the water. "There is no substitute [neither surrogate nor letter] for being with donors and directly asking them for support."

Go where the fish are. This usually requires actually leaving campus, to engage in live meetings.

Close observations are a prerequisite. Learning the habits and patterns of trout is much like boning up on tax incentives, market status, and donor interests. "Throwing the right fly is a basic rule."

All fish are fun. You miss out on lots of fun, if you take pleasure in landing only the big ones, especially since most gifts are considerably smaller.

Venture into new waters. In fishing, this can lead to "new discoveries, and a new catch." Likewise, moving beyond one's comfort level to meet new donors in new places results in a wider base of support.

Leave the area better than you found it. Like the conservation practiced by fishermen, "After each visit, donors should be left with a better understanding of our institutions and their own calling to give to our worthwhile goal."

Of all the 15 pointers in Mr. Powell's entertaining and instructive analogy, our favorite is this one: "Occasionally, I just get lucky. I've learned to enjoy the good fortune and take credit for the fish that happens by on chance. Sometimes gifts just come in, and no development was needed. Take the credit. You were there to receive it!"

CAMPAIGN TRAIL

Wheeler's "Sustainability"

THE CAPITAL CAMPAIGN for the **Wheeler School**, in Providence, Rhode Island (Coed Day, 800 students PK – 12), has realized a giving total of $19.5 million, nearly completing its goal of $20 million. But that's only part of the story told by head of school Dan Miller in the Spring 2008 issue of *Now & Then @ Wheeler*.

Like many independent school heads, Mr. Miller progressed through the academic ranks, loved teaching, didn't know much about fundraising, and didn't *want* to know. That all changed when he took on this job six years ago.

"Wheeler changed my mind. While I've known many schools rich in resources but short on character, this school presented an opposite, albeit urgent dilemma. Deep in the areas that matter most—culture, energy, innovation, intelligence, and optimism—we lacked the financial wherewithal to broaden our excellence and, most important, to sustain it for future generations of teachers and children. With so much at stake, fundraising seemed far less a burden, and more a meaningful opportunity."

The first expenditures from campaign revenue will include faculty and staff compensation and financial aid. In addition, the East Campus has been completed and the new Student Union groundbreaking is scheduled for June.

Looking ahead, campus improvement objectives are ambitious: a new playground, refurbished courtyards, and a new Hamilton Lower School building. In phase three, there are plans for a new student assembly hall and arts center, a renovated Wheeler Hall, and many new classrooms.

"And yes, we will need the help of everyone who is able, and yes, this is fundraising—an opportunity to do something important for an exceptional school."

By the way, in five short years, endowment has grown from $5 million to $13 million.

NOTA BENE

The Economics of Philanthropy

For its March 9 issue, the *New York Times* devoted its magazine section to the topic of philanthropy. In "What Makes People Give?" business and economics columnist David Leonhardt discusses the work of several economists attempting to take the guesswork out of fundraising.

As they employ fundraising in its many forms, nonprofit organizations rely on several standard practices. During his interviews, Mr. Leonhardt discovered that the assumptions driving these practices are frequently based more on conventional wisdom than on empirical evidence. When these practices have been formally studied, research findings have fallen into three categories: results that confirm assumptions; results that flatly contradict them; and mixed results. That is, the practice worked, but differently than expected.

Challenge Gifts
- Assumption: Offering a challenge to match gifts is a strong incentive to donors.
- Study: Solicitation letters in four versions—no match and three match-levels (dollar-for-dollar, two-to-one, and three-to-one)—were sent to prospective donors.
- Findings: Letters offering a challenge or match resulted in more gifts than letters with none, but gift amounts were not affected by the size of the match. "It was as if Starbucks had cut the price of a latte to $2 and sales didn't increase."

Seed Money
- Assumption: Announcing that 50 percent or more of the capital campaign goal has already been raised in the quiet phase legitimizes the request to smaller donors and results in more and bigger gifts in the second phase.
- Study: Letters requesting donations to underwrite the purchase of new computers costing $3,000 for a university science center gave two different amounts already raised—$2,000 or two-thirds and $300 or 10 percent.
- Findings: "The more upfront money [the school] claimed to have on hand, the more additional money it raised."

Gift Incentives
- Assumption: Peer pressure motivates donors to increase their gifts.
- Study: When public radio listeners called in to donate money during on-air pledge drives, they were told that the previous caller had given more. The amounts varied.
- Findings: $75 elicited no increase in gifts; $300 resulted in an average increase of 12 percent; $600 also resulted in increased gifts; $1,000 resulted in the smallest increases. "There was a sweet spot for a radio station, but a steep penalty for overshooting it."

"For those of us who aren't putting together fundraising appeals," writes Mr. Leonhardt, "the real importance of these studies is a glimpse into the human mind, and the clues about how to make the world work a little better."

This brings us to his discussion of what he calls *impure altruism*. In campaigns to save the whales, for example, "people aren't giving money merely to save the whales; they're also giving money to feel the glow that comes with being the kind of person who's helping to save the whales."

And so, he asks, "Why do people give? Is it really to make the world a better place, to give back to the community as a token of gratitude? Or is giving instead about something less grand, like seeing your name on a building, responding to peer pressure, or simply feeling good about yourself? To put it bluntly, is charitable giving a high-minded form of consumption?" This concept, he assures us, is "less depressing than it may sound."

We at *TTL* would go David Leonhardt one better. *Feeling* good about *doing* good, and about *being* someone who does good, is, in itself, pretty good. Maybe that's enough.