

50 Ways to Improve Your Special District Board

- 1) Know your job as a Board Member. Be able to describe it in 10 seconds or less.
- 2) Develop a historical perspective of the evolution of your District for new Board Members, the CEO and staff, and the public.
- 3) Implement a meaningful Board member orientation, including facilities tour, major issues review, and budget review. Develop an orientation (and welcoming!) notebook to be delivered to new Board Members as soon as possible after their election.
- 4) Establish Board Policies and Procedures, including participation expectations for Board Members. Review them annually and as part of new Board Member orientation.
- 5) Ask CEO what he or she expects from Board Members. Analyze the answers carefully. Include appropriate portions in the Board's Policies and Procedures.
- 6) Develop a process to discuss failure by Board Members to abide by expectations set in Board Policies and Procedures. Get agreement from Board Members as to the process. Implement this process.
- 7) Adopt a meaningful yearly Board calendar, and distribute it to CEO, Board Members and staff. Discuss process for departing from calendar.
- 8) Establish a methodology for building the Board meeting agenda. Who is responsible, and how will issues be placed on the agenda?
- 9) When will the agenda be available for review by Board Members? Set an expectation that your Board packets will be available at least 7 days before the meeting. If that is not possible, at least have the agenda ready 7 days in advance.
- 10) Study your Board packet well in advance of the meeting!
- 11) Make sure all members of the Board, the CEO and the District Clerk (if there is one) understand the requirement of minutes in regular and executive sessions. Review the process for taking and maintaining minutes annually. Make sure your minutes are detailed enough to reflect declaration of conflict of interest.

- 12) Evaluate standing committees - which ones are needed and why? Are they populated with the right people to get the job done? Clarify their procedures.
- 13) Discuss with Board Members the “deference” to be given to committees. Do we re-hash their work despite their long hours, or do we trust them to have evaluated the right information and respect their recommendations without rubber-stamping them?
- 14) If you have a strategic plan, at least once a year, revisit it. How are you doing? What’s working and what’s not? Why?
- 15) If you do not have a strategic plan, why not? Do you need one?
- 16) As part of your planning process, establish 3 Key Performance Indicators for your district. Establish how performance be measured. Measure it as part of your yearly Board calendar.
- 17) Educate your Board about “actual” and “potential” conflicts of interest. Establish procedures that mirror state law in your Board Policies and Procedures. Are Board Members expected to challenge one another on conflicts of interest issues?
- 18) Educate your Board about improper benefits. Establish expectations and procedures in Board policies about gifts, offers, etc.
- 19) Be able to explain the budget process in one minute or less to someone who is unfamiliar with government budgeting.
- 20) Be able to define your role with respect to the budget process in 15 seconds or less.
- 21) Be able to point to the line items in your budget that are most likely to cause concern among constituents. Be able to explain them. Be able to explain the tradeoffs that were made, if any.
- 22) Educate your Board as to what a public record is. Establish in your Board manual how records will be preserved.
- 23) Establish a separate email account (or at least a separate folder) for all district-related correspondence. Use it exclusively for District-related matters. Decide whether District or Board Members will retain these public records.

- 24) As part of yearly Board work, conduct oversight into the retention of public records by District.
- 25) Educate Board about public records that must be disclosed to the public in response to a request and those that are exempt from disclosure. Establish in Board policies what a Board Member should do in response to a public records request.
- 26) Be able to explain the reasons for open meetings laws in 1 minute or less.
- 27) Know the exceptions to the requirement for a public meeting. Make sure you are comfortable with the rationale for any executive session, or get advice. Never, ever break the confidentiality of an executive session.
- 28) Avoid any appearance of impropriety with social activities by Board Members that may create a quorum.
- 29) Clarify with Board Members their role in representing the District in other settings, such as city council meetings, intergovernmental agencies, state government, nonprofits.
- 30) Identify all the organizations/people with whom your District is, must be, or should be engaged. Map them. Evaluate how well you are connected with them.
- 31) Establish clear methods for public input into meetings and other activities.
- 32) Board Presidents: practice measures to bring an unruly public meeting under control.
- 33) At least once a year, devote time to looking at “what’s heading your way” in terms of service delivery and service delivery challenges.
- 34) Agree among the Board about the proper process for complaints about a CEO, or service delivery.
- 35) If another Board Member grumbles about the CEO to you...follow your agreed-upon process.
- 36) If a member of the public grumbles about the CEO or service delivery...follow your agreed-upon process.

- 37) Establish clear expectations for CEO in relation to Key Performance Indicators in a public meeting. Connect these Key Performance Indicators to other desirable activities by the CEO.
- 38) Establish a meaningful annual review of the CEO. Between reviews, pay attention to whether the Board and the CEO seem to be on the “same page”. If Board and CEO seem to be going in different directions, take action: Board President intervention; review of work plan; frank exchanges of views.
- 39) Negotiate zones of authority between the Board and the CEO - and follow them.
- 40) Analyze failures to follow the zones, and reaffirm commitments.
- 41) Understand structural differences between the perspective of the Board and the perspective of the CEO. It’s not personal. It’s structural.
- 42) At least once a year, find a way for the CEO to speak freely (and without repercussion) about his or her relationship with the Board, and how the Board can better do its job.
- 43) Understand how to speak to Board Members at all three levels of communication: business, process, and meaning.
- 44) Understand how to speak to the CEO at all three levels of communication: business, process, and meaning.
- 45) Agree to deal with conflict early and often. Develop a conflict management process at each level of the organization.
- 46) Elect a Board President who is a strategic thinker - who can see what is heading your way and deal with it early and often.
- 47) Elect a Board president who is comfortable dealing with conflict and who has the ability to smooth those ruffled feathers.
- 48) *Never, ever* ambush the CEO or another Board Member at a meeting.
- 49) If anyone ambushes a Board Member or the CEO at a meeting, immediately identify this as a problem. Do not proceed to resolve the substance of the matter. Make a plan to deal with the issue after everyone has all the facts. (Yes, even if it is a short time fuse matter!)
- 50) Do not be afraid to ask for help for a fractured situation.