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Surprise-Proofing the Boardroom: Effective Communication and Prevention Tactics

BY CYNTHIA B. GRUSKOS
PBSN PRESIDENT

THE ONLY SURPRISES I ENJOY COME IN LITTLE WRAPPED BOXES WITH a bow on top. Surprises at the board table at best can be uncomfortable, and at worst can create irreparable cracks in the foundation of the board-president relationship.

These cracks may be unseen to the casual onlooker, but the close observer can spot the slow spread of distrust, lack of confidence, and the unraveling of years of relationship building.

I have had the good fortune to serve in my position as senior assistant to the president and board of trustees at Brookdale Community College for 10 years, and if there is one thing I can say with 100% accuracy, it's that problems and challenges are going to arise while running a community college. While you will have limited control over unexpected problems, you will have the opportunity to control communication. The key element to controlling communication is well-vetted procedures and policies to help with the unexpected and the day-to-day operations.

As a board professional, you collaborate with your president, trustees, executive team, and college counsel, placing you in a key role to facilitate and encourage clear communications among all constituents. Here are my best practices that are a decade in the making.

1. **Act swiftly.** Social media and online newspapers have taken away any luxury of time to address problems. One minute, the problem is a spark, and the next it is spreading like wildfire and could be making national headlines before you even have all the background information. Your board needs to know immediately if there is an ongoing issue, and that the president is addressing it. Ideally, this communication should come from your president, but you can draft a communication and work alongside your president in a time of crisis.



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2. **Loop in your college relations team** immediately, so that they can craft a statement to be shared with media. Share the message with your trustees and president's office staff to ensure everyone is delivering the same consistent message.
3. **Seek legal counsel if needed.** Our college counsel shares a monthly legal report with background information and updates highlighted in red so you can quickly see the progress from the previous month. The report is written so you do not need a law degree to understand it.
4. **See something, say something** is a popular security phrase, but it also applies in our roles. The board of trustees is responsible for caring for our institutions. The quality of our education, our reputation, and our financial stability need to be safeguarded. If you see something or hear something that is causing you angst, communicate it to the president. Encourage your president to be upfront with small and big problems so there are never surprises at the board table.
5. **Encourage trustees to ask questions** in advance of the board meeting. As a board professional, you may be a conduit for questions and concerns, since trustees may feel more comfortable talking to you, as they may not want to appear unknowledgeable with their peers and the president. If trustees have concerns, the president of your college and the board chair should be aware of them so they can be addressed, and additional information can be provided.

6. **Improve written communications.** Board books larger than a dictionary are not the answer. Clear, concise board briefs are more valuable than information overload.
7. **Presentations matter.** Visually dominant learners who are sitting at your board table need to see photos, charts, and diagrams, as complex auditory explanations are not sufficient for all individuals.
8. **The loudest voices are not the only voices.** All trustees should be encouraged to share their viewpoints and questions. Our current board chair and committee chairs make a point of specifically going around the table and asking each trustee to voice their opinion. Accomplishing this best practice requires high-functioning boards; however, as a board professional, you are positioned to encourage the professional development of your board.
9. **Consistent president messaging.** Our president, Dr. David Stout, sends out a weekly communication by email, highlighting his activities each week and how they support the strategic priorities established by the board.

In this article, I have outlined my best practices for clear communications. Now it is time to hear yours. I will begin a conversation in ACCT Connect. Please join in this important discussion. I respect your wisdom and I believe wholeheartedly that we can grow and learn from each other.



Seated, from left: Reatha Bell, Cynthia Gruskos, and Shelby Foster; standing, from left: Dr. Larisa Pfeiffer, Benita Duncan, Yvonne Sandoval, Caitlin Murphy, Lori Hazel. Not pictured: Dr. Michelle Scott and Dr. Sara Singleton.



It's the Little Things

BY SHELBY FOSTER
PBSN VICE PRESIDENT



IT'S 3 P.M. ON BOARD MEETING DAY. ALL THE WISHFUL THINKING IN THE WORLD WAS not going to will my comfortable shoes out of my closet and into this board room. I would just need to get through it. It was just a little thing.

As professional board staff, we are responsible for the “little things.” Sometimes it is those little things that can make the difference between a smooth board meeting day and a difficult one.

In my many years of preparing for board meetings, I have learned to adapt to a multitude of changes in the way we plan and execute a board meeting. There is a lot that we cannot predict; however, some things we can prepare for — and we should.

These are the little things in my board meeting kit:

Tennis shoes and an extra blazer or sweater. Being in comfortable shoes while I am preparing the board meeting sets me up for success. I also keep an extra jacket around in case I need a quick change. It took me years to realize that I didn't have to be “board meeting ready” all day long.

Golf pencils. Leave these out for people to use, and you'll always get them back. These are wise words provided to me by a colleague at a previous ACCT Congress. (Thank you, Wendy!)

Duct tape or masking tape. My best multi-tool. Something slightly askew or broken? Need a quick paperweight? You can even pick crumbs off the floor with it!

Batteries and an extra USB charger. One time I had to dash out of a board meeting to get some batteries for our presentation remote. Never again. I usually keep AA and AAA batteries around. Take a look at your equipment and modify accordingly.

Room spray deodorizer. Some districts have a multi-use board room. People may have used the room before you arrived. Others have a dedicated board room. Either way, bring room spray.

Foldable pocket knife. I keep one on my work key ring. It serves as scissors in a pinch, and is especially useful for opening up packaging or boxes. Consult with your campus PD about what blade length is allowed on your campus.

Food for yourself. *Oh My Goodness* feed yourself. It was your job to order, arrange the delivery — or be the delivery — and then set out food for your trustees. Make sure you take care of yourself, too. Eat.

Band-Aids. 350-page board meeting packet.

What are the little things that you do to make your board meeting day run smoothly? Feel free to share them with the PBSN group on ACCT Connect. Haven't joined ACCT Connect yet? Check it out here: <https://connect.acct.org/>.

Remember, all those little things help contribute to your peace of mind for the big task at hand — the board meeting!



Learn more at www.acct.org/membership/PBSN.