

# Governing as a Team of Leaders: Aligning Vision, Trust, and Action

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CASB Annual Convention

December 12, 2025

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# About the Presenter

- 19<sup>th</sup> year working in school board development for 5 school boards associations.
- Former school board member in the lower Snoqualmie Valley East of Seattle.
- Co-editor of *Improving School Board Effectiveness: A Balanced Governance Approach*, 2015.
- PhD, University of Washington, research into what boards consider when evaluating a superintendent.
- Quarterly writer for the *School Administrator* (AASA) Board Savvy Superintendent column.
- Author, *Confessions of a School Board Member: What Every Superintendent Needs to Know*, June 11, 2026.

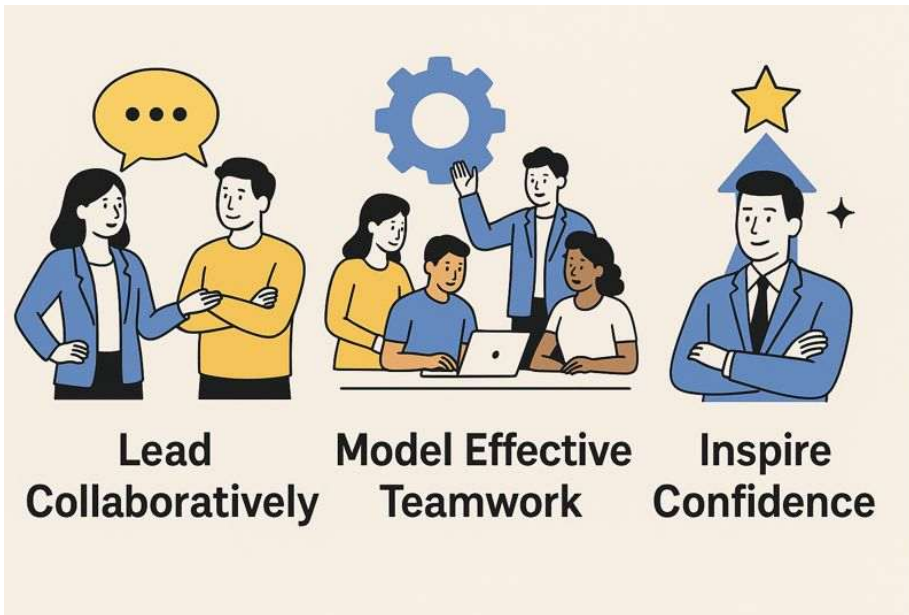
## **Great districts are led by a highly capable board president-superintendent team.**

Identify ways board presidents and superintendents can model collaboration and a strong partnership for ongoing district and student success. Sharpen skills through interactive discussions and hands-on activities, for communication, agenda planning, and decision-making.

Explore how shared vision and trust create a culture of continuous improvement and community support. Leave with tools and insights to lead collaboratively, model effective teamwork, and inspire confidence throughout your district and community.

## About this session

# Aligning Vision, Trust, and Action



“Working successfully with a school board is not only critical for a superintendent’s success in a particular district, but it is essential for success in the career.”



“A highly effective relationship between the superintendent and board president is a hallmark of high-performing school districts.”

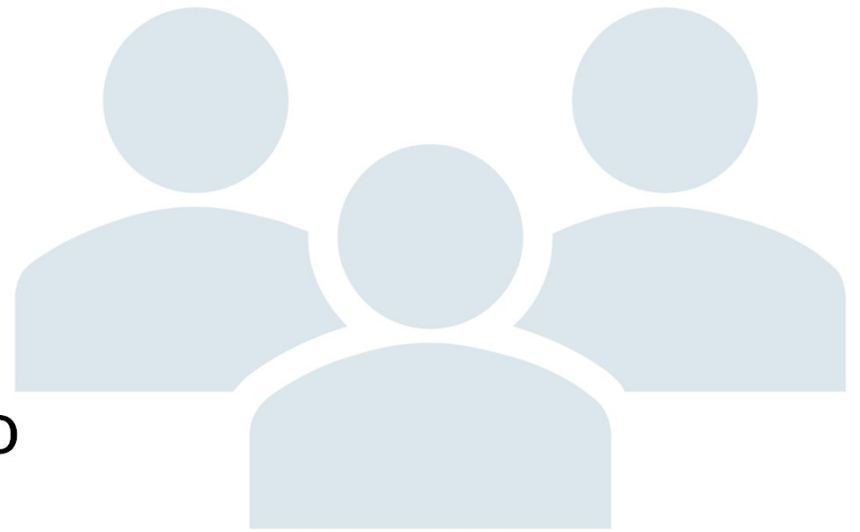
*Confessions of a School Board Member: What Every Superintendent Needs to Know*

A superintendent's relationship with a board president may be the most important relationship in a school district for overall system success.



# Lead Collaboratively

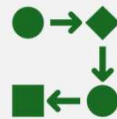
What does it look like to  
lead collaboratively?



# Leading Collaboratively Requires



A Shared Vision for Where We are Going.



A Shared Commitment to Values and Processes.



A Shared Understanding of the Current Reality and Facts.



# What is Our Reality?

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- How are the students doing?
- How are the staff doing?
- How is our progress on our goals?
- How is the board doing?
- How is the board-superintendent team doing?
- How is the superintendent doing?



# The Precarious Board-Superintendent Relationship

## **Can yield undesirable consequences:**

1. Deter school improvement.
2. Affect the quality of educational programs.
3. Increase conflict over district instructional goals and objectives.
4. Weaken district stability and morale.
5. Negatively influence the superintendent's credibility.
6. Impede critical reform efforts and collaborative long-range planning.
7. Increase the “revolving door syndrome” for superintendents.

Professors Lance Fusarelli and George Petersen (2005)

# **Confessions of a School Board Member: *What Every Superintendent Needs to Know***

by Phil Gore  
June 11, 2026  
Bloomsbury US  
Available for Pre-order



# Lessons from Superintendent Dan Domenech

01

Have a plan

02

Build an effective partnership with the board president

03

Focus on doing what is best for students

04

Lead the community conversation

05

Build a productive partnership

# Have a Plan

# 1

“During my interview with the board, the board chair asked what I would do to rescue the district from its current dilemma.... During the interview, I laid out my plan and left thinking that perhaps I would at least get to keep my current job. I went home that evening not feeling good about my interview, only to be shocked when the board chair called me that same evening to tell me I had the job.”

— Foreword by Dan Domenech, AASA ED Ret.

# Effective Board President-Superintendent Partnership **2**

“My second district was a perfect illustration of what Phil describes as working with the board chair... Phil addresses the dangers and strengths of working with a strong board chair. The board chair in my new district had served in that capacity for over fifteen years. I was fortunate... I was the superintendent in that district for fifteen years.”

—Dan Domenech

# What's Best for Students

“My last superintendency position was in Fairfax County, Virginia... Whereas I never knew the political affiliations of my New York board members, Fairfax board members ran with strong affiliations to the Democratic and Republican parties. In some cases, the board seat was a stepping stone to political office... I was fortunate that, although my Fairfax board members had different political affiliations, they were always unanimous in doing what was best for the students we served.”

—Dan Domenech

# Lead the Conversation

“Unfortunately, the current political climate does not bode well for public education as we know it. There is legitimate criticism that necessary changes have not been made. There will be a continuing debate as to what those changes should be. As the chief education officers in their communities, superintendents [and boards] will need to lead the efforts to do what is best for the children and the communities they serve.”

—Dan Domenech



# Build Productive Partnerships

“[Confessions] clearly delineates how the relationship between a school superintendent and the school board is critical to the success of a school district. While the superintendent serves as the chief executive officer of the district, the school board provides governance, oversight, and policy direction. A productive partnership between these two entities can lead to improved student outcomes, staff satisfaction, and community trust...”

—Dan Domenech



# Model Effective Teamwork

What is it that you want  
to model so you can  
encourage it happening  
throughout the school  
system?

# Two Managers

## **Superintendent**

The superintendent manages the district, including oversight of personnel, programs, and finances.

## **Board President**

The board president manages the board, including clarifying expectations, board priorities, and governance protocols and processes.

# Highly Effective Board Presidents

- Bring members together.
- Ensure all voices are heard.
- Balance tolerance, and effectiveness.
- Respect the rights of all.
- Provide support and clarity.
- Anticipate the board's will.
- Articulate role clarity.
- Support board improvement.
- Provide a sounding board.
- Keep the board informed.
- Weigh their words.
- Exercise discretion.

# Mitigating Power of the Board President

No one person, not even the board chair, can consistently be out in front of the board on every issue all the time.

When the board concentrates too much power in the board chair, the board and district suffer.

The board needs to address abuse or overuse of power by a chair to ensure the full board is governing and overseeing the district as a unit.

No board chair should have unilateral authority to direct the superintendent, and certainly not anyone else working in the district.

# Is This the Will of the Board?

Learn to ask this question  
of yourself, individual  
board members, and the  
whole board.

# What the Superintendent Must Provide for the Board

1. Tenure, at least five years.
2. Concise, honest communication.
3. Self-reflection and commitment to professional growth.
4. Execution on the board priorities.
5. Effective engagement with staff and community.
6. Impeccable personal and professional integrity.

# What the Board Must Provide for the Superintendent

1. One clear voice.
2. Commitment to growth and learning together.
3. Compelling board priorities.
4. Agreed-upon practices for community engagement.
5. Clear, shared understanding and commitment to their role.
6. A board culture that models the behaviors and attitudes that support student learning.



# Keeping the Board Informed (What & When?)

## CONFESSION

“At times as the board chair, I had to make a judgment call about sharing information with the full board. My decision was not always supported by all other board members when they found out.”

## TIP

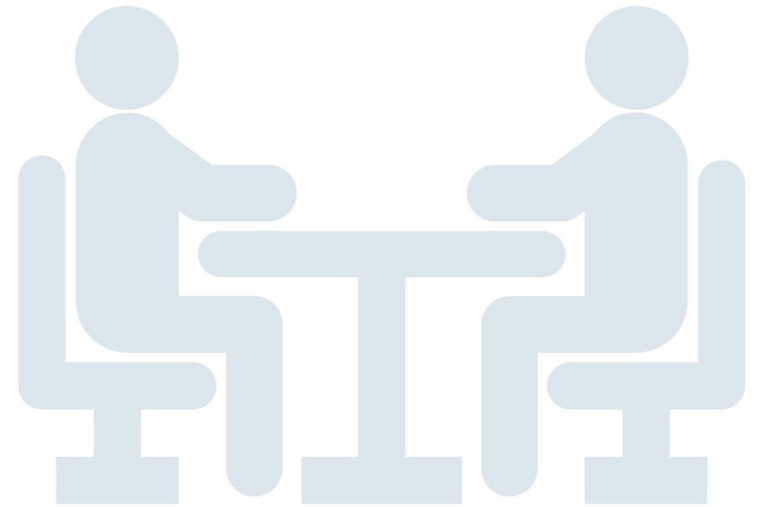
“Run sensitive situations by your board chair. Encourage them to thoughtfully consider if and when the full board needs to be notified. Follow up with the board chair and discuss at what point, if at all, the full board needs to be apprised of the concern or your decisions.”



## Inspire Confidence

**What does it take to inspire confidence in others:**

1. As a superintendent?
2. As a board president?



# Sufficient Information

A successful veteran Colorado superintendent stated, “It is part of my responsibility to give the school board... sufficient information of high enough quality, [so] they can make good decisions.”

Early in his career he tended to tell the board only the information members needed to vote his way, and he learned over time to give the board all the background information available to make the best decisions they could. This included potential downsides and concerns the superintendent had explored about the recommendation.

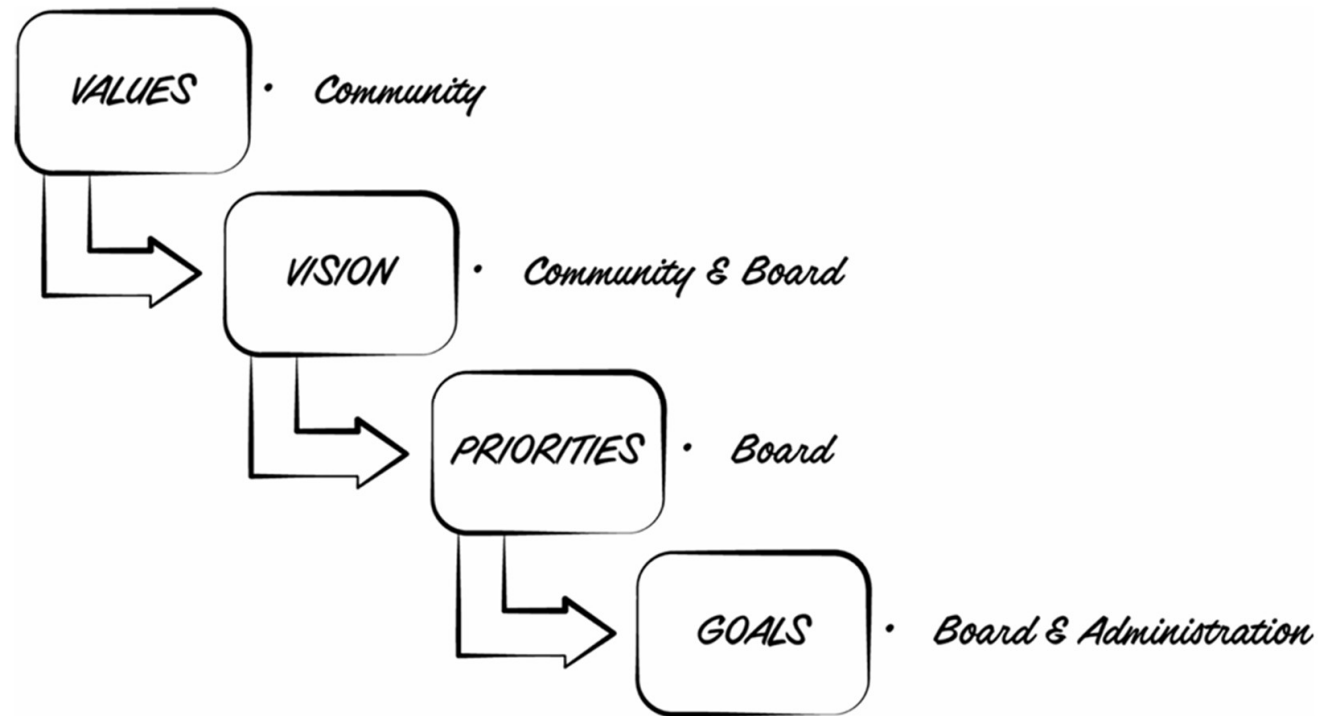
## **Never chastise or attempt to discipline a school board member.**

(Never publicly, and never like a misbehaving child, have them sit across from your desk.)

A superintendent received an unfavorable evaluation from his board. He marched across the street to the local newspaper office and requested that they print his evaluation in the paper. He thought that printing his negative evaluation was going to make the board chair look bad. She was married into a fifth-generation farm family, which was the largest landowner in the district.

- 1. How did this end?**
- 2. What could he have done differently?**

# What are Your Governance Priorities?



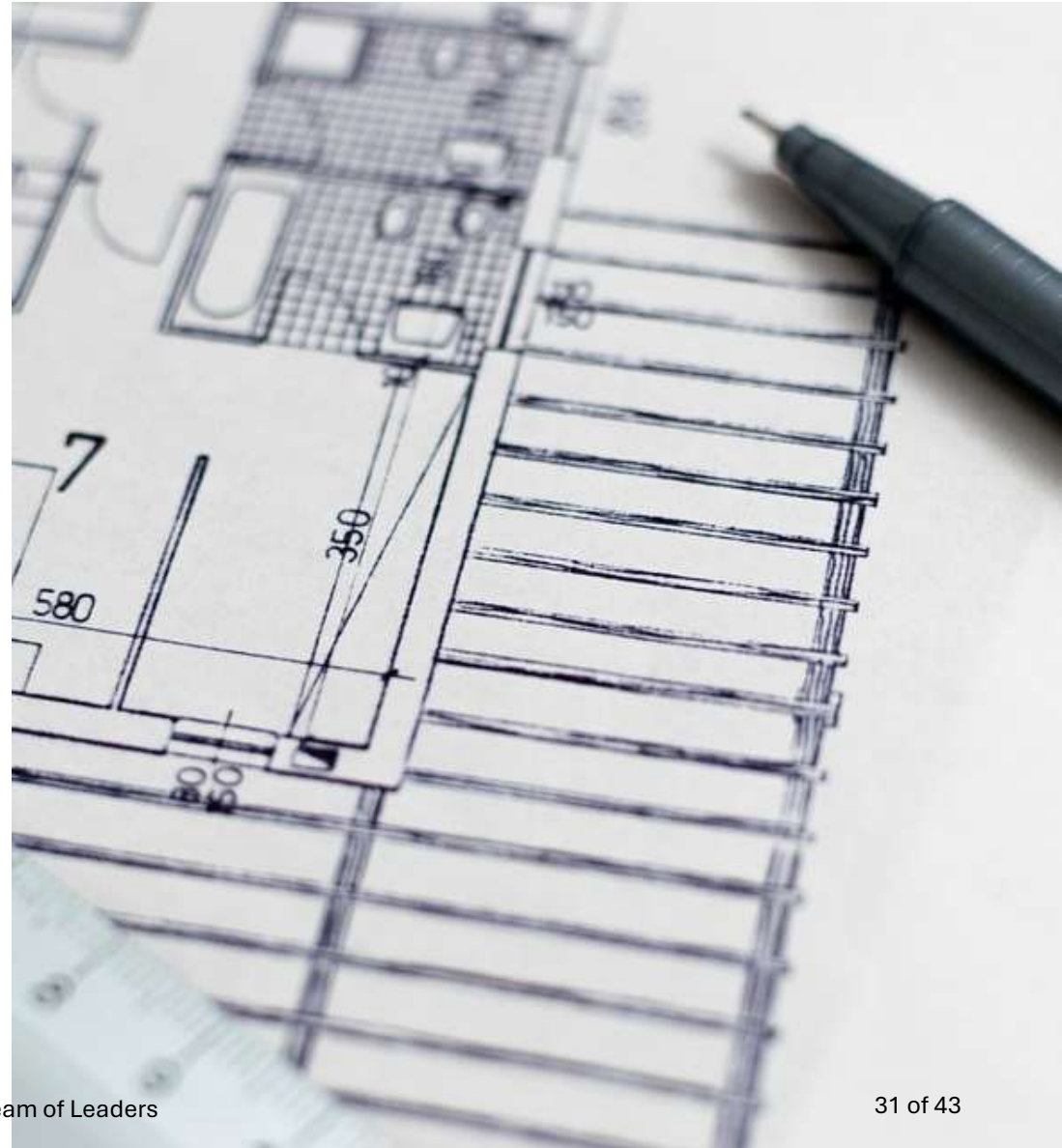
**Figure 9.1** Working Together with Complementary Roles

# Evaluating the Superintendent

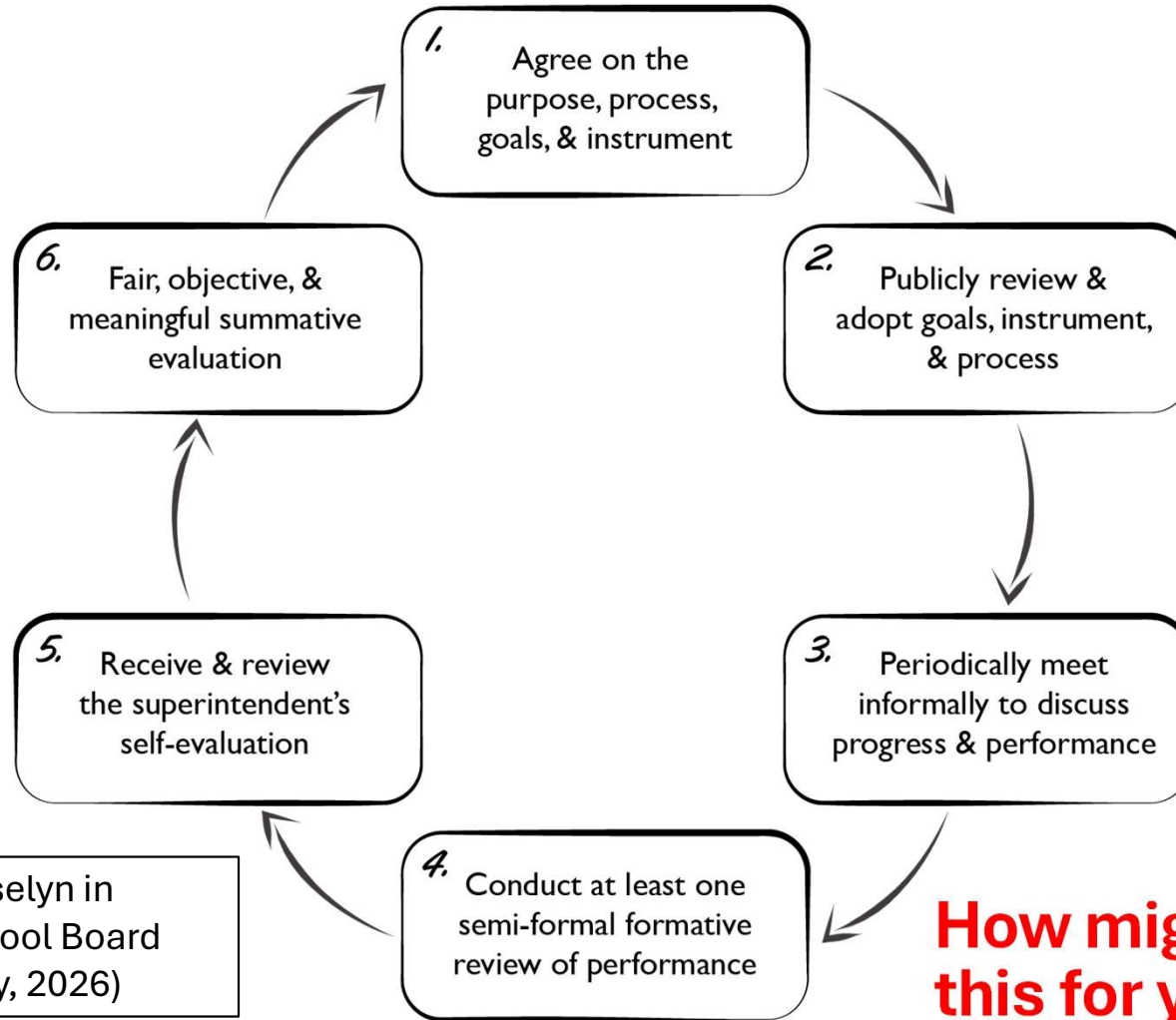
Is the district accomplishing through the superintendent's leadership what we need and agree that the district should accomplish?

## Have a PLAN!

- Think of superintendent evaluation as a process that happens throughout the year.
- Create and follow an Annual Cycle for evaluation.
- Talk about district (CEO) performance often.



# Cycle for Evaluation

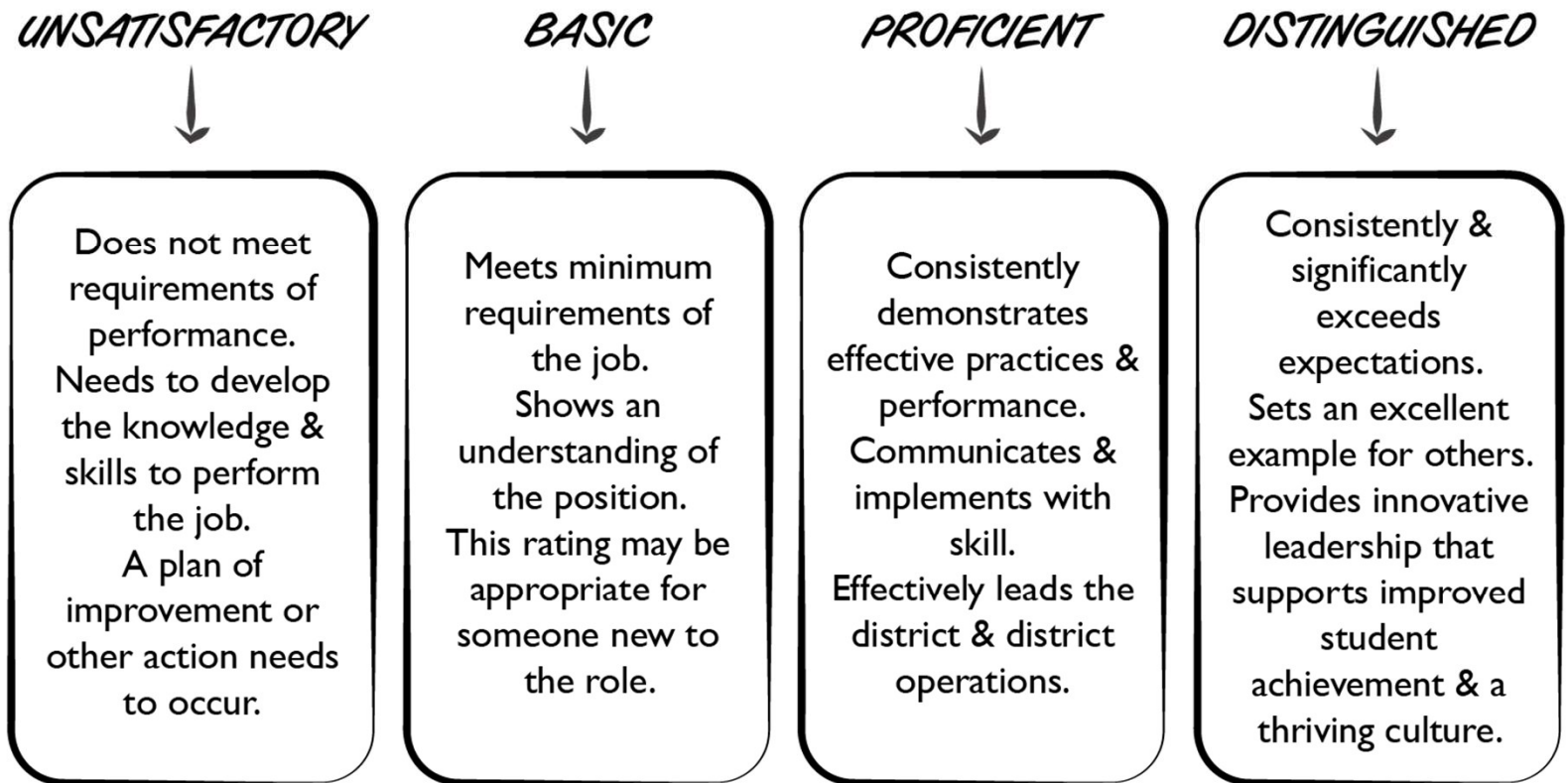


*Figure 11.1 Superintendent Evaluation Cycle*

JR



# Use a Rubric for Evaluation



Artwork by Jessie Roselyn in *Confessions of a School Board Member* (Bloomsbury, 2026)

*Figure 11.2 Sample Evaluation Ratings Rubric*

*JR*



# Calibrate Shared Understanding among the Team

## **At the start of the evaluation period**

- Discuss what each rating means.
- Practice with concrete examples. What would be considered a 1, 2, 3, or 4, etc.?
- Discuss as a team what might need to be different to earn a higher rating.
- Consider and agree on the rationale used for evaluating performance.



# Good Governance All Year

- Make it standard practice to discuss why someone feels or votes the way they do.
- Explain to your colleagues why you feel a certain way about a topic or agenda item.
- Ask, “Could you tell us more about why you believe this is right (or wrong) for our district?”
- Make it a habit to ask the superintendent about their rationale for recommendations.
- Learn to ask: What does the research/data suggest? How is this recommendation benefitting other districts like ours? and What adjustments need to be made for our district?



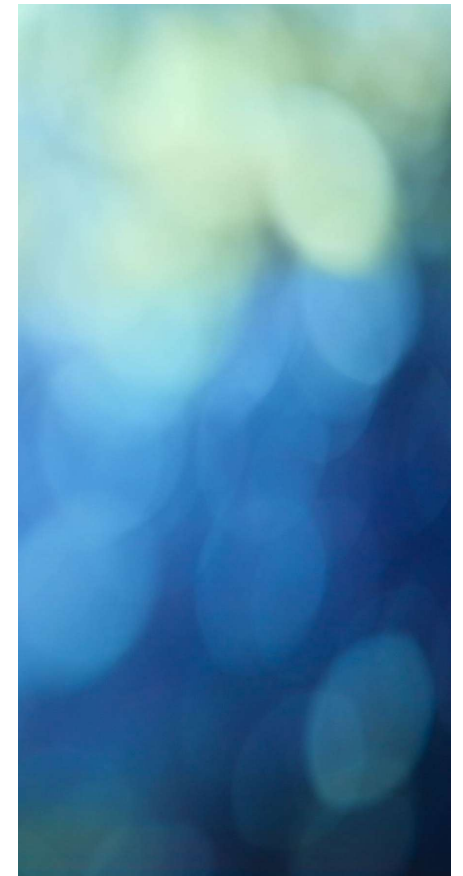
## The Power of the Question

**“The question”** may be the greatest power a board member has. The more curious and focused the question is at the governance level, the more power it wields for supporting improvement.

When board reports and agenda items are at the operational and administrative levels, it invites questions at those levels.

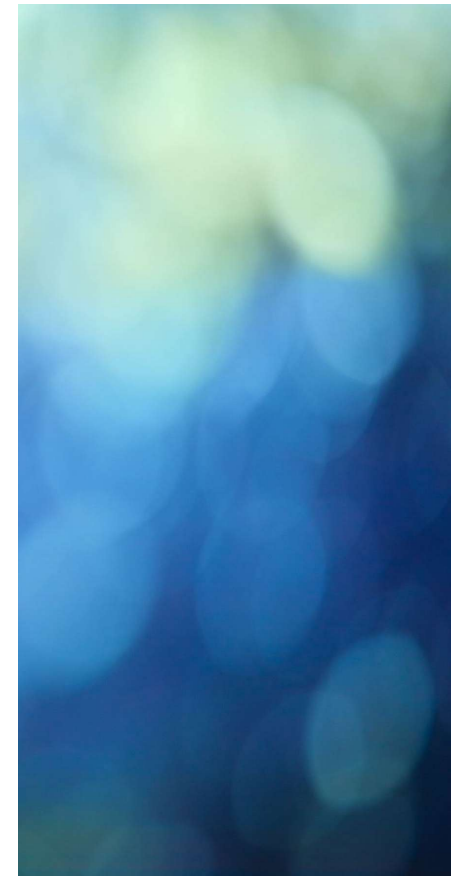
## Build Trust: *What the superintendent can do*

Share	Share with the board during the hiring process what your intentions are for the district and the board-superintendent relationship.
Remind	Remind the board of your intentions soon after you begin employment.
Discuss	Discuss progress in the district and discuss your relationship frequently and honestly.
Apprise	Apprise the board as quickly as possible when your intended actions or outcomes are delayed.
Check in	Check in with the board about the board members' perspectives on district progress.



## Build Trust: *What the board president can do*

Share	Share your hopes, concerns, observations, and feedback on performance.
Remind	Remind the superintendent of your confidence in them, your intentions for them, and of the board's priorities.
Discuss	Discuss progress in the district and discuss your relationship frequently and honestly.
Apprise	Apprise the superintendent and board when things are not going as intended.
Check in	Check in with board members and the superintendent about their perspectives.



## Build Relationship

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1. Spend time together.
2. Become a “Chief Listening Officer.”
3. Build a partnership—Team of Two.
4. Care about each other.
5. Focus on mutual purpose and the work.







Have a plan for how you will work well with a school board.



# What Do Board Members Want from a Superintendent?

Trust as a thought partner and contributor



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graph TD; A[Trust as a thought partner and contributor] --> B[Inside information from sitting with the superintendent]; B --> C[Opportunities to add value]; C --> D[Community satisfaction from effective service and responsiveness]; D --> E[Respect];
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Inside information from sitting with the superintendent

Opportunities to add value

Community satisfaction from effective service and responsiveness

Respect

# RESPECT

*“Respect is not something that needs to be earned. It’s something we owe to everyone. It is the birthright of every human being.”*

— Kim Scott, *Radical Candor*



*Thank you!*

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