
Terrible Habit #1

Humiliate a District Employee in Public

7:21 p.m., Item 5B

It is 7:21 p.m. on the first Thursday of the month—not quite an hour into the board meeting—and the board has just moved on to Item 5B on the discussion agenda. The item is a four-page report from Linda Lesko, the assistant superintendent for special education, on the district’s preschool program. Linda gives a brief and somewhat disorganized summary of the report, closing with an offer to “answer any questions the board might have.”

You start to squirm in your seat. When you read the report several days ago, you were bothered by the number of typos (five by your count), the number of misspelled words (four by your count), and the many ungrammatical phrases and sentences, including two that were not sentences at all (i.e., “More to come in my next report” and “So goes another year”). To make matters even worse, the numbers in the table do not add up correctly, making you question whether the report is based on correct information. In your view, the report is completely unprofessional and reflects poorly on the district. You remember that your initial reaction to reading the report was dismay.

As you listen to Linda’s summary and reread your handwritten notes on the report, you begin to feel tension building up inside. You feel let down by the district leadership, and that disappointment is beginning to turn into anger. How could Linda write such a sloppy report, knowing that it would be distributed to the public both at a

board meeting and on the district's website? How could the superintendent, Debbie Dineson, have allowed this report to go forward? How could your fellow board members be so complacent? Did anyone actually bother to read the report?

The mix of emotions is making your heart beat faster, and you look around to see if your fellow board members are going to say anything about the sloppiness of the report. The board president, Al Altman, calls on a board member, who asks a few polite questions. This apparent contentment with the report makes you feel even angrier, and you know you just have to say something.

"Richard, do you have any questions for Linda?" the board president asks, looking over to you. With your heart pounding and your temperature rising, you hold up the little report that is the object of your frustration and say, "Did anyone bother to actually proofread this document? It's full of typos and grammatical errors. It reflects very poorly on our district. If a student handed in a report like this, the grade would be an F."

A hush falls over the room. Linda sinks in her chair and looks away. The superintendent chimes in with, "Can you please give us the edits you are suggesting? We will be glad to make the corrections. We want to have professional reports that we all can be proud of."

The discussion moves on, but you are not really listening. You are wondering, "Did I just do something wrong? Was I being a good school board member?" You tell yourself that your motives were pure; all you wanted was what is best for district, which in this case means that public reports should look professional. You did not set out to humiliate anyone, but as you replay the event in your mind, you wonder if Linda and Debbie might feel that you humiliated them in public.

Plan B

What else could you have done? Please put a check mark next to the action (or actions) that make the most sense:

- You could have dropped the issue because it will end up being more trouble than it is worth.
- You could have contacted Linda directly to tell her to correct the errors you found.
- You could have contacted the superintendent with your complaints.

- ___ You could have contacted your fellow board members with your complaints.
- ___ You could develop a review procedure for releasing district reports so something like this does not happen in the future.
- ___ No, by gosh, you were right in the first place, and you should have the courage to stick by your convictions. Linda and Debbie deserved to be called out for that unprofessional report.

If you checked the third option, you are thinking like an effective school board member. The first option will not work, because you honestly believe that it is not in the best interests of the district to ignore something that needs to be fixed. The second option seems to make sense, but it violates the chain of command in the district. You are not Linda's supervisor. Your point of contact as a board member is the superintendent. This is the only person the board hires, fires (hopefully not), and evaluates. When you have a complaint about an administrator, teacher, or classified employee, you should direct your complaint to the superintendent. Of course, if your concern is routine, and you have a good working relationship with the employee (such as a school principal), and the superintendent does not object, then a quick conversation with the employee can be in order.

The third choice is Plan B—a backup plan that is really your best course of action. You can meet with the superintendent (or even just talk with her by telephone) to show her why you are not satisfied with the report. It is best to stick with the facts—in this case, pointing out the typos, misspellings, and inappropriate wordings. Rather than focusing only on what's wrong, you might also want to discuss ways that the superintendent ensures review of important district documents. It is then the superintendent's responsibility to work with Linda and, if necessary, to forge a better procedure for reviewing district reports. Hopefully, the superintendent will be able to satisfy you that the problem is being addressed appropriately. If you don't like the way she handles it, this can become an element in the superintendent's evaluation, and you can even ask to have an agenda item that addresses the policy aspects of your concern—such as the district's procedure for review of documents prior to release.

Option 4 is a poor choice because it violates the principle that the public's business should be done in public. If you feel the need to discuss with your fellow board members the district's procedure for reviewing reports prior to release, then you will need to request an agenda item on this issue.

Option 5 might seem like a reasonable approach, but it comes under the heading of micromanaging—in this case, usurping the superintendent’s job. It is certainly legitimate to ask the superintendent to describe the district’s procedure and to ask about ways to improve it, but it is not your responsibility as a board member to actually write the procedure for her. If you are not satisfied with the district’s procedure, then an agenda item is in order so the board can discuss the procedure and give direction as a board to the superintendent.

The final option was a bad idea when you executed it at the board meeting, and it remains a bad idea in retrospect. Leadership by humiliation is the hallmark of a terrible school board member.

Lessons Learned: Never Humiliate a District Employee in Public

Never humiliate a district employee in public. Such tactics reflect badly on you as a school board member and can be seen as a form of bullying. Such tactics can poison your relations with district employees, which will greatly diminish your effectiveness as a school board member. Such tactics are generally not very effective, as some people tend to dig in their heels when they feel attacked. Such tactics even raise legal issues about the confidentiality of evaluations of district employees.

Superintendents’ Lessons Learned

Could Superintendent Debbie Dineson have done anything to prevent the school board member’s terrible episode? First, she could have made sure that safeguards were in place for review of all materials going to the board before they are sent off. Even a cursory internal review would have detected the need for revisions in Assistant Superintendent Linda Lesko’s report. Given Linda’s reputation for sometimes releasing reports that are not quite ready for prime time, the superintendent should have made sure a review process was in place. In addition, the superintendent may have to do a better job of monitoring Linda’s performance. If Linda is unable to write satisfactory reports, she should be relieved of that duty or even relieved of her position. Second, the superintendent could work on creating rapport with board members so they will feel free to let her know

before the meeting if they receive substandard materials in the board packet. In this way, the superintendent can provide corrected versions of the material at the meeting, or at least handle the matter informally outside the meeting. Third, perhaps the superintendent could have practiced faster first aid at the meeting by interrupting the board member before he worked himself up into a tirade. The matter could have been controlled if the superintendent had been a little quicker to acknowledge the need to get the board member's corrections and bring a more polished version of the report back to the board at a later meeting. Part of the superintendent's job is to help prevent board members from looking bad, and in this case there is plenty of room for improvement.