

“People, Governance, and the Mission”
Richard Sprague, Director of Lasallian School Boards

I have had the pleasure of working with many of you, but recognize that there are quite a few of you I don't yet know. Perhaps more for your benefit, I will introduce you to my role. I serve on the District Leadership Team in two capacities—as the Director of Lasallian School Boards, and, in the area of Human Resource Training and Development.

It is like working under two different umbrellas—one umbrella is LEC about which Brother Stan spoke this morning, and the other is the Consulting Agreement between De La Salle Institute and the Boards of Trustees in each of the schools. For our purposes here, I will treat the two roles separately in spite of how they continually overlap, but before I do, I would like to say something of a more personal nature first.

I have greatly enjoyed my work with the Boards and the Presidents these past two and a half years. Having come out of an intense day-to-day involvement in and service to the corporate world makes this work even more special.

Here I have had the opportunity to serve an entirely different breed of Board Chair and President whose work is about justice, fairness, equity, service, faith, hope and love. I am also deeply grateful to each of you Board Chairs, Trustees, and Presidents. Your work has been extraordinary.

In this past year the conditions of our world suddenly changed, and rather than dropping back under the weight of increased need and decreasing resources, you stepped up the pace of development, sought other avenues for funding the mission, and committed yourselves to building endowments...all in an effort to ensure the future of your commitment to a human and Christian education for the young, especially the poor. So in a single breath we say thank you for who you are, for what you have done, and for all that you will continue to do.

Now let me say something about my role with the District starting with the area of Human Resource Training and Development. Frankly, nothing gets done without people. The more effectively we work together, the more seamless the organizational structures we develop, the better we are at achieving the end results we seek. This role is really about a kind of formation that helps people more fully achieve their potential as individuals and groups.

In this capacity, my work includes such things as:

- Facilitating administrative team development;
- Providing Career and Life Management Counseling with individuals in the schools;
- Assisting in Brother Community Development;
- Assisting the Presidents and the Boards in developing strategic plans;
- Assisting the Presidents in evaluating potential new administrators, and occasionally assisting with the evaluation of some administrators;
- Providing and developing evaluation and assessment tools for use within the schools; and often,
- Acting as a sounding board for the concerns of Board Chairs and Presidents.

I have not known more dedicated and selfless people than I have come to know in this role. You and your colleagues who are not here have given so much of yourselves and have accomplished remarkable things in the name of this mission.

Yet, the people side of things always holds our greatest challenges. Sometimes our needs and desires collide. Sometimes we burn out under the stress of having to do so much with and for so little. And rather than take a much needed step back it seems as if the demands of the mission continue to increase because the need is so great and we are not the kind of people who can look need in the eye and turn away.

Finding and forming the right people is a challenge in itself. Retaining people will be even more challenging in light of all the competing forces. It isn't enough to hope that people will do this work because of the value of the mission. Issues of justice with respect to wage and working conditions will also challenge us.

As we think to the future of this mission, I would raise the following questions for our consideration this week:

- What must we do to continue the development of strong effective administrative leadership teams?
- How will we address the challenges of recruiting, hiring, and training leaders?
- What creative methods must we develop to attract and retain excellent teachers in an increasingly competitive market?
- How do we recast people in roles that best reflect their changing needs?
- By what methods can we encourage the ongoing development of professional excellence for everyone involved in Lasallian education to ensure that we are equal to the rapidly changing demands of the 21st Century?
- What 21st Century technologies and structures will be required to achieve the mission?

I am confident that challenges other than these will be raised as we work in our smaller groups, but at a minimum I would hope we would consider the implications of these on our work.

Now let me shift emphasis a bit and step under the LEC umbrella. As the Director of Lasallian School Boards, I serve as the liaison between LEC and the Boards of Trustees in all the schools with the exception of those where there is a shared charism. Generally speaking, and I hope this will become clear in what follows, my role is to put a human face on the LEC structure. In that regard, some of my responsibilities are:

- To Chair the Association of Board Chairs which meets three times per year and is a counterpart to the SSAA;
- To train new trustees in governance methods;
- To help develop tools for more effective board meetings;
- To help boards in the monitoring of the President's performance;
- To facilitate the board's annual evaluation of the President;
- To facilitate the board's annual meeting and agenda planning, and in general;

- To assist the Boards in any way that will help them do their work.

I'm certain there is a lot of myth and mystery surrounding our Boards of Trustees. In some schools we may not even know who is on the Board. It may seem like some amorphous group rarely connected in any way to the real life of the school.

Actually our boards are vital and working hard to find ways to become even more connected to the life of the school. We are committed to learning more about a board's role in such things as fundraising, strategic planning, development, recruitment, the further refinement of our mission policies, and in general, the continuing development of excellence in governing.

Currently, our Boards are made up of lay people who have had a long history with the schools, and lay people who have had virtually no history with the schools but who bring a great deal of expertise to the Board's work. We also have Brothers and other religious on our Boards. We have Catholics and Protestants, educators and members of the business community. To some degree our boards are ethnically, economically, educationally, and religiously diverse.

More specifically, since 1994 when the schools were incorporated and boards were first developed, we have engaged 174 lay partners and 40 Brothers in the active governance of the LEC schools, and another 47 Brothers and Partners in our shared charism schools. When you take into account 6-year terms and intentionally keeping boards small, this is a significant number of people participating in the development of policy and ongoing governance of the schools.

Currently, as Brother Stan pointed out this morning, we have in the LEC schools, 59 Lay Partners and 20 Brothers serving on our Boards. He went on to say, "Brothers constitute 25% of those charged with overseeing the accomplishment of the mission in the schools, a striking contrast to the 6% of Brothers at the level of direct involvement in teaching and administration". The Brothers on the Boards have been invaluable in keeping both our heads and our hearts focused on the mission.

In our trustee-training workshop, in which we introduce potential trustees to the Lasallian heritage and board governance, I usually introduce the subject by quoting from R. Buckminster Fuller's book, *Operating Manual For Spaceship Earth* written in 1963. The opening lines of the book are:

I am enthusiastic over humanity's extraordinary and sometimes very timely ingenuities. If you are in a shipwreck and all the boats are gone, a piano top buoyant enough to keep you afloat that comes along makes a fortuitous life preserver. But this is not to say that the best way to design a life preserver is in the form of a piano top.

I think we are clinging to a great many piano tops in accepting yesterday's fortuitous contrivings as constituting the only means for solving a given problem.

This initial formation for trustees in the Lasallian heritage and governance is vital lest we end up clinging to piano top-like systems and structures and then exhale the weary breath that comes from having just stayed afloat another day. Advancing the mission requires preparation and training in governance and the heritage itself.

Ongoing formation is even more important in light of the diminishing number of Brothers. Seventy-five percent of our Trustees don't have the history that resides within the Brothers. Their leadership at the board level is critical not only in guiding the development of policy, but especially in helping further acquaint trustees with Lasallian heritage and spiritual values. Without this formation our boards could resemble just another piano top.

Some of you know Bud Hollingberry, a founding trustee of La Salle Yakima. Bud is a devout Presbyterian who remarked upon reaching the end of his tenure on the Board just last month that they need to be sure they nominate another "milk toast" protestant to replace him. Another trustee, a devout Catholic remarked that he was more Catholic than any of the rest of us.... at least more Lasallian.

It was Bud who continually chided the Board that it must not quit reading about St. John Baptist De La Salle, must not forget to include formation activities in board meetings, must continually come to a better, deeper understanding of this charism. He said, "I will never be the same for having been introduced to De La Salle in our Board Development Workshop at Mont La Salle". Now he will introduce others to De La Salle. He is the best definition of what a trustee is—one who represents the moral owners—in this case, the Brothers.

We have included people, like Bud, who had no history but were moved by the wonder of this tradition. We have made Lasallian Partners, in a sense, out of Corporations through programs like the Corporate Internship Program in North Portland. The results of this inclusion of new people and groups will be the exponential spread of this mission and access to resources about which we've only dreamed.

Without an emphasis on Board Development, we may not have capitalized on these relationships. This is why we have been so committed to training trustees in advance of their serving and why we can say proudly, that as of August of this year, every trustee in this District will have been through the initial training on the Lasallian Heritage and governance.

I would like to add one more thing to the subject of training. Over the years I have facilitated planning sessions for boards of trustees for such organizations as the YMCA, Graduate School Alumni Boards, Make A Wish Foundation to name a few. In the course of these workshops, I inevitably ask, "What kind of training did you go through to be on this board?"

The closest anyone has ever come to describing some kind of formal board training prior to serving is to have talked of an orientation session including the dates of the meetings, the names of fellow trustees, and something about the organization itself. Have they been trained in governance? To date, 100% of the hundreds of people asked have said, no!

That we require training in governance and the Lasallian Heritage has been met with high praise and appreciation even from people whose experience on major corporate and non-profit boards is notable. Busy and highly committed people appreciate our taking board work seriously. That we are so intentional about governance, that we insist on trustees being prepared, that LEC will not approve new trustees until they have completed training, are some of the reasons our boards are doing such good work.

It's not just the training, however, that results in strong boards. Our boards are strong because they focus their energies on an enterprise that is student-centered not profit driven. Our boards are strong because they are focused on end results for the recipients not rewards for themselves. Our boards are strong because they work in concert with Presidents whose sense of justice and ethics is beyond repute. Our boards are strong because they are committed to the faith dimension and the spiritual values of the Lasallian tradition.

Our boards are also strong because we have adapted methods from the worlds of commerce and business, and we have done so on the conviction that sound educational delivery systems are only stronger and better and more effective when they are disciplined and efficient. These structures must, of course, pass the test of supporting human and Christian values and, in our case, providing learning opportunities for the marginalized and the poor.

Yet, as strong as our Boards are, significant challenges exist because we have brought people together who have differing perspectives, experiences, ideas, ideals, needs, hopes and fears. Our boards are places where differing ideas and ideals may at times collide. But frankly, we govern, we lead, we educate better when we bring together people who see things from different vantage points, who can participate productively in an exchange of ideas, and who can then generate visions that lead the schools into even greater service of the poor.

So our challenge is:

- How do we manage our conflicting, often competing, ideas, ideals, and perceptions about governance?
- How do we manage the conflicting ideas about the relationship of Boards to Schools, Boards to LEC, and Boards to De La Salle Institute under our Consulting Agreement?
- How do we clarify the difference between LEC and the Consulting Agreement?

With respect to the Boards themselves:

- What is the most effective way to engage in Board formation?
- What is the role of the Board in fundraising?
- How do we ensure board leadership and accountability at the local level?
- How do we modify governance models to meet cultural and organization needs?
- How can Boards and Presidents work together to help faculty, staff, students, and parents understand more fully the Board's governance role in the schools?
- What is the Board's role in advancing the mission as distinct from the creation of mission policies?
- How do we get Boards better engaged in the life of the school?
- What kinds of leadership, what kinds of boards, what kinds of governance, what kinds of structures, systems, methodologies will it take to achieve the mission we have set for ourselves?

- How do we find, train, form, engage, learn from, and empower people like Bud Hollingberry in all our schools and on all our Boards?

Another challenge we may need to face is our tendency to get distracted by a concentration on process or governance models, or structures or anything else that stymies our ability to focus on the mission. These are but frameworks that provide discipline and help us focus our energies. Boards are not ends in themselves but vehicles to provide a high level of leadership, to get people engaged, and to advance the mission. I hope we will continue to treat them accordingly.

When it is done right, everything that comes out of our boards goes into our schools, and sociologists have said for years that everything that comes out of our schools comes into our society. This is both frightening and challenging, for it raises the ante when we talk of the board's leadership role.

Leadership won't happen by accident. Our challenge is to bring people together, to train them in governance and the Lasallian heritage, and provide leaders for these schools who can define what the future should look like and make it happen.

I hope we can increase our flexibility and adaptability in the ways in which we do things so that we can emphasize the qualities of leadership that will vault these schools forward. I look forward to our continued efforts together under both the LEC and People Development umbrellas.