

Breaking Terrible Board Habits Part 1



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- Goleta Union School District (CA) board member since 1981
- Served with 4 different superintendents (and dozens of board members)
- Contributor to more than 400 publications



Selections from 28 “Terrible Habits” from these four sections of the book:


- District Teamwork
- Board Teamwork
- Public Relations
- Personal Style



Terrible Habit #1 Humiliate a District Employee in Public

Issue: District employees submit a report to the Board with a number of careless mistakes. You get angry and publicly criticize them, saying, in part, “Did anyone bother to actually proofread this document...If a student handed in a report like this, the grade would be an F.”

What else could you have done?

1. Dropped the issue.
2. Contacted the staff directly.
3. Contacted the superintendent. 
4. Contacted fellow board members.
5. Develop a procedure for reviewing.
6. Stick with your public criticism stance.



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Terrible Habit #2 **Negotiate for the District**

You get a call from the president of the local teachers' union who complains that the superintendent isn't supporting teachers in concerns about playground duty, nor will she agree to contract fixes. You think about how the union supported you in the election and agree to look into it. You even divulge some of the information from board/superintendent discussions on the issue. There are prescribed rules for negotiations as you know.

What else could you have done as a board member?

1. Ignore the call.
2. Thank the union official but say there's nothing you can do.
3. Thank her for the call, saying the superintendent keeps the board informed, and the bargaining team represents the board.
4. Ask if they can meet; they helped you get elected after all.
5. Suggest the union president speak at a board meeting.



Terrible Habit #3

Attack the Administration in Print

You believe a principal is doing a bad job. You've received complaints and collected evidence. You go to the superintendent to make your case that the principal should go. She seems surprised and says she "will look into it." You can't believe she isn't agreeing with you. You become angry. You decide to take the matter into your own hands. You send a pointed letter to the editor. It is printed. The reaction isn't what you expected. The superintendent calls upset. Board members say they have been blind sided. You learn you may have violated labor laws.

What else could you have done?

1. Say in the letter you are writing as an individual.
2. Email your thoughts to board members and your supporters.
3. Visit schools but not with an eye to micromanaging.
4. Take your info to the superintendent and let them handle it.
5. Post your letter to social media.



Terrible Habit #5

Never Question the Administration

At the Board meeting you receive the maintenance and operations report. It is a detailed presentation with plans to spend considerable money on repaving playgrounds and parking lots. The money has been allocated and the report is clear. You had planned to ask a few questions but now fear you will exasperate your fellow board members. So, you decide to stay quiet and vote with the rest without getting your questions answered.

What else could you have done?

1. Don't waste time with naïve questions. We need to move on.
2. Ask any questions you have after the meeting or during breaks.
3. Ask questions before the meeting, or via email.
4. Ask your questions at the meeting until you fully understand.



Terrible Habit #4

Micromanage the Superintendent

Issue: Board member goes to a school to view the computer lab, asking the teacher questions, and taking notes. You prepare a memo with suggestions including hiring your neighbor as a consultant and sending staff to a training you think is best.

What else could you have done?

1. Tell the superintendent they're just suggestions
2. Thank the principal for the visit.
3. Visit schools but not with an eye to micromanaging.
4. Stop school visits



Terrible Habit #8

Disrespect a Fellow Board Member

Issue: After a 3-hour meeting, a board member brings up a pet subject about gender equity. You get frustrated and roll your eyes. The board member is insulted and you have an uncomfortable verbal exchange at the public meeting.

What else could you have done?

1. Add polite comments at the end of your criticism.
2. Tell the speaker you are not a sexist.
3. Sat quietly while she finished.
4. Controlled your eye-rolling, etc.}
5. Made your points in a more respectful way.



Terrible Habit #6

Solicit Complaints from Staff

You like to have lunch with teachers in your district. Today you visit an elementary school, get your food and join the group. At first it is hard to get them to chat. So, you ask a question: How's the new copier policy working for you? Someone says, "Terrible!" That opened the floodgates of concerns, including criticisms of the principal and another teacher. You leave feeling the lunch got out of control and you implied you would look into these issues.

What could have you done differently?

1. Don't have lunch with the teachers.
2. Invite the principal to join you and the teachers.
3. Have lunch only when the Union rep can attend.
4. Keep the lunch focused on productive conversations.



Terrible Habit #7

Ask For Special Treatment

Your daughter is entering 12th grade. You believe she needs to be in the Honors Calculus Class. Her education is important to you. All the other parents call to request special favors. So, you decide you can too. You call the principal and identify yourself as a board member. You get put through immediately. You ask for the class assignment. The principal says, "No problem." You feel good, but you wonder. You are more than just a parent. Did you go too far?

What could have you done differently?

1. Make the call, but don't announce yourself as a board member.
2. Tell the principal you are calling as a parent, not a board member.
3. Ask your spouse to make the call.
4. Wait and see what happens. May she will get into the class anyway.



Terrible Habit #9

Speak for the Board

You have arrived for a school's annual Spring Sing. You happen to be the only board member in attendance. You are asked to come to the front and say a few words. You have no plan, so you start by thanking the principal and saying how much you support the arts. You decide to add a bit, and pledge to support a new auditorium for the school. You get light applause and a quick thank you. Did you say too much – on behalf of the board?

What else could you have done?

1. Nothing. Just stand up a wave.
2. Just say the first part.
3. Say it all but make clear the pledge of funding to be your opinion.
4. Say it all and add even more about your support for the arts and pledges for school funding.



Terrible Habit #10

Build Coalitions

After a board meeting you invite a fellow member to meet at a bar after the meeting. You and he often agree on budget matters and compare notes. Once there, your friend suggests you invite another board member to join your little caucus to plan how you can join forces on some upcoming issues.

What should you do differently?

1. Meet at a coffee shop rather than a bar.
2. Invite all board members to attend.
3. Help the board reach consensus on the elements.
4. Continue meet with this board member but don't talk about board business.
5. Don't talk about school board business to anyone outside of a public meeting.




Terrible Habit #11

Abstain on Tough Votes

Issue: You abstain when a difficult issue up for a vote – calling a bond issue election. Your abstention on a 5-member board caused the vote to fail on a tie. The issue has been fully discussed.

What else could you have done?

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1. Ask to put off the vote.
 2. Vote with the majority so your vote won't really decide.
 3. Make an informed decision.
 4. Be absent when the vote is taken.
 5. Tell your board members you will flip a coin.




Terrible Habit #12

Be Decisive; Don't Compromise

Issue: There are four options for running the summer school program. You and one other favor plan 2; two others favor Plan 4. There's some discussion about how to come together – but you stick to your guns; no compromise.

What else could you have done?

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1. Explain why the plan supported by 2 board members is bad.
 2. Carefully explain the pros and cons of each plan in your view.
 3. Ask board members how you can get their vote.
 4. Try to incorporate parts of the other plan into your preference.
 5. Suggest a pilot version of one plan to get votes on your preference.



Terrible Habit #13

Come Unprepared to Board Meetings

Issue: You have had time to review the agenda and read the materials, but you haven't. It comes to an item that needs deliberation. The board chair calls on you to begin with comments and/or questions. You have nothing to say and ask for them to come back to you. It's clear you aren't ready and the board takes a break.

What else could you have done?

1. Not come to the meeting.
2. Announce that you are not prepared.
3. Try to put off votes until a later meeting, saying you need more time.
4. Try to do a better job of covering up the lack of prep.
5. Apologize and say you will do better next time.



Terrible Habit #14

Do Too Much Homework

Issue: After careful research on an issue you care about – grounds management – you write a policy for the district. You've written a statement for the meeting where it will be considered and invited supporters to attend. You think you are doing a great job.

How could you have handled this situation?

1. Talk about your ideas with the superintendent.
2. Instead of a final policy – provide a list of elements to consider.
3. Help the board reach consensus on the elements.
4. Offer to be on a committee to study the issue.
5. Make sure there is ample opportunity to input from the community.



Terrible Habit #12

Be Decisive; Don't Compromise

Next agenda item is deciding how to run a summer school this year. The 1st of 4 options is the least expensive and limits the program severely. Plan 2 costs more but serves the most deserving students and can fund two sites. Plan 3 is very costly, and Plan 4 is also expensive and involves a risky program never used before and will limit the # served. Turns out 2 members favor Plan 2; two favor innovative Plan 4, and the fifth member supports yet another. You are at a stalemate:

What else could you have done?

1. Explain all the reasons Plan 4 is a bad idea.
2. Using a dry board, show the pros and cons of each plan, and summarize why Plan 2 is best.
3. Ask what needs to be changed in Plan 2 to get more support.
4. See if you can incorporate the appealing aspects from Plan 4 into Plan 2.
5. Suggest running a pilot of Plan 4, while you implement Plan 2.



Terrible Habit #15

Represent Your Supporters

A reporter calls you while you are at lunch. You step out to take the call. They say they're on a deadline, and you are feeling rushed and without the data you need to properly answer a budget question. But, rushed, you say something like, "yes, those cost projections might be a little screwy." You encourage the reporter to contact the superintendent. Guess what's in the headline.

How could you have handled the situation?

1. Warn the reporter you are in a noisy café and you may not be at your best.
2. Tell the reporter you are 'speaking off the record.'
3. Try to focus on the reporter's questions.
4. Listen to the questions but insist they call back.
5. Not answer the call.

How does YOUR BOARD handle this situation?




Terrible Habit #16

Minimize Public Input

Issue: An unusually large number of people sign up to speak at your meeting on an issue of concern to them. The comment period gets long, so you cut it off. Not unsurprisingly, people are angry.

What else could you have done?

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1. Let everyone speak if it takes all night.
 2. Ask people to limit their comments to 2 minutes (normal rule is 3 minutes).
 3. Move the item to the end of the agenda.
 4. Cut off input after 30 minutes, suggest others send comments via email/letter.

How does YOUR BOARD handle this situation?




Terrible Habit #19

Confide in a Reporter

Issue: A reporter calls you while you are at lunch. You step out to take the call. They say they're on a deadline, and you are feeling rushed and without the data you need to properly answer a budget question. But, rushed, you say something like, "yes, those cost projections might be a little screwy." You encourage the reporter to contact the superintendent. Guess what's in the headline.

How could you have handled the situation?

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 2. Tell the reporter you are 'speaking off the record'.
 3. Try to focus on the reporter's questions.
 4. Listen to the questions but insist they call back.
 5. Not answer the call.
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How does YOUR BOARD handle this situation?



Terrible Habit #17

Run Your Own District Survey

The board has been discussing changes to the school calendar. The plan you support would keep the current calendar – Plan 1. Plan 2 calls for school starting school two weeks earlier and lengthening the holiday break. Plan 3 is the same as 2 but would end school two weeks later, and Plan 4 is a complete year-round schedule, which you hate. So, you conduct your own survey. The results indicate most people support Plan 1. By conducting your own survey, did you get in the way?

What could you have done differently?

1. Forget your survey.
2. Keep the survey but send only to friends and supporters.
3. Have a survey expert give you advice.
4. Instead of a survey, set a public meeting at a coffee shop.
5. Discuss with the board the idea of asking the superintendent to send out a survey to parents and staff.



Terrible Habit #18

Argue with a Hostile Speaker

There's a need for a new library at one of the schools in your district. When approached at the market, you sign a petition in support for the library. The advocates attend a meeting and ask for everyone in the audience who supports the plan to stand up. You join them before the board has a chance to hear the proposal. You later feel like you jumped the gun.

What were your options regarding this issue?

1. Stand up for your 1st Amendment right to sign a petition.
2. Avoid the supporters at the market.
3. Explain to the petitioner that you will work with the board on a solution.
4. Tell them you look forward to hearing from them at the meeting.
5. Don't sign the petition before the board could meet and consider it.



Terrible Habit #20

Garner Public Support

There is an issue coming to the board soon that you care a lot about - a new innovative arts project. You have a Facebook page with a link to your blog: "Rich Richland's School Board News." Before the meeting you share the news that you will support the new arts funding, and that there are two hold-out board members. You ask supporters to contact these board members. You have made your decision before listening to any others.

What else could you have done?

1. Don't blog.
2. Close down your social media page.
3. Clarify your Web site is provided by you, not the district, and link to the district's information pages.
4. Be less heavy handed.
5. Invite comments.
6. Keep on doing what you are doing. You have free speech rights!



Terrible Habit #24

Use the District's Credit Card

Once in a while you have lunch with Mike who is a board member in an adjoining district. After one nice outing where you discussed each other's issues on your boards, you decide to use the school district's credit card to pay. Why not? It's not that much money.

What else could you have done?

1. Pay for your own lunch.




Terrible Habit #21

Sign a Petition

Issue: There's a need for a new library at one of the schools in your district. When approached at the market, you sign a petition in support for the library. The advocates attend a meeting and ask for everyone in the audience who supports the plan to stand up. You join them before the board has a chance to hear the proposal. You later feel like you jumped the gun.

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Terrible Habit #22

Ignore Minor Conflicts of Interest

Issue: A couple of personal friends of yours have offered a proposal to purchase land owned by the district that is up for sale. They say they don't quite have the financing lined up, but they are committed to see it through. You make the motion to accept their offer. Are you giving them favorable treatment?

What is a better option?

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1. Go ahead and make the motion because you know there's no conflict.
 2. Recuse yourself from the discussion and vote.
 3. Simply state publicly that these are your friends and make the motion.
 4. When you see this on the agenda, contact the superintendent and get legal advice.




Terrible Habit #23

Take Political Stands

Issue: A member of Congress from a neighboring state gets caught making a racist comment. You know your school district has strong anti-racist policies so you think calling out this politician is a good idea. Even though this issue is not on the agenda, you make a surprise motion to take a vote to condemn the statement.

What would be a better response?

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1. Come prepared with a polished resolution and accompanying fact sheet to support your motion.
 2. Drum up supporters to attend.
 3. Water down your resolution to get more buy-in.
 4. Don't ask the board to take political stands on issues that are unrelated to the school district.




Terrible Habit #26

Do a Favor

Issue: You are out for a walk with your dog when you are approached by neighbor. She tells a story about her daughter's math work being graded down because it was late. The mom is angry and expects you to right this wrong. You are in a hurry and, without thinking, confide that this teacher has been having some personal problems, and that you'll talk with the principal.

What should you have done?

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1. Never discuss business when you are out and about. Schedule a meeting for later.
 2. Politely try to change the subject.
 3. Tell the mother there's nothing you can do.
 4. Listen to her story but offer no real response.
 5. Listen, and suggest she follow the chain of command, and keep you informed.



Terrible Habit #25

Remember Your Political Party

School board service is a nonpartisan position. However, you are a proud party person and want to address the education issues your party has prioritized. So, you ask that these topics be discussed at a board meeting.

What could be wrong with this scenario? Remember, you were not elected to serve your party but to promote the best interests of the entire district.

What's a better plan?

1. Try to reach out "across the aisle" to members of other parties.
2. Get some help from your party leadership so you can help them.
3. Work harder behind the scenes to line up political support.
4. Forget your political party while you serve as a school board member.



Terrible Habit #27

Accept Gifts

You are a new school board member. You and your spouse are offered free tickets to the high school football games. You are pleased and accept them. Then you see the middle school principal and get free passes to those athletic events too. Should you continue to accept the passes?

What could be wrong with accepting these tickets? You know, ticket and snack sales help fund the teams.

What else could you have done?

1. Use one pass for yourself and pay for your spouse.
2. Return the passes and tell the principals you are shocked they are trying to bribe you.
3. Don't use the free passes.
4. Pay your own way when you go to ticketed school events.



Terrible Habit #28

Radiate Negative Energy

There is nothing more traumatic than closing a school. It's standing room only at the board meeting – mostly agitated. The board has debated all year about closing an elementary school with declining enrollment. There has been lots of public input. Tonight's the vote. Each board member speaks to cheers and/or boos. At the end of an emotional roll call, you cast a no vote. You are granted a comment and you say: "This is the worst decision I have ever seen. This vote will come back to haunt you."

What would be a better comment:

1. No comment. If you can't be positive, be quiet.
2. Keep protesting, but tone down the rhetoric.
3. Postpone your protesting; wait to do it down the road when you can remind your colleagues of their bad decision.
4. Say something positive.



Questions?

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