

Supercharged Cabinet Meetings

By Dr. Douglas Reeves*

Cabinet meetings are expensive. The cost in time alone runs into the tens of thousands of dollars for even a small district. But the hidden cost of cabinet meetings is the cost of poor decision-making which results in inadequate deliberation and consideration of alternatives. This article identifies seven keys to supercharge your Cabinet meetings, saving time and money for your district.

1) Establish a charter.

Every Cabinet, standing committee, and task force, should have a charter that establishes the purpose of the meeting and the norms to be followed. For example, a Cabinet charter might be something like this: *The purpose of the Cabinet is to support optimal decision-making by the Superintendent and governing board through evidence-based deliberation. Every Cabinet member is responsible for careful consideration of the evidence for and against decision alternatives before the meeting, and for coming to the meeting prepared to ask questions and make cogent arguments for and against the alternative decisions.* Note what this charter does not include: Updates, PowerPoint presentations, and information sharing, all of which should be presented through memoranda before the meeting, not by oral reports to the Cabinet. Proposed agenda items that do not conform to the charter can be reviewed before the meeting and either eliminated or revised.

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2) **Share Responsibility for Enforcement of Norms.**

Although many meetings have norms, it often falls to just one or two people to enforce these essential expectations of individual and group behavior. The “norm-minder” is a position that should rotate or perhaps be selected randomly. Starting and ending on time, avoiding cross-talk, sharing specific evidence, and staying on topic are all fundamental norms and are often written and posted visibly in the Cabinet room. However, if the entire group does not share responsibility for the norms, then blatant disregard for the norms becomes, well, the norm.

3) **Record decisions and commitments visibly and in real time.**

While formal minutes of the Cabinet meeting are not necessary, it is absolutely essential that there is a clear record of decisions and commitments. Ideally, this is done in real time, perhaps projected onto a screen during the meeting, so that there is absolute clarity on decisions and personal team commitments before anyone leaves the meeting. Decisions and commitments can be maintained in a single document – a log of what the Cabinet actually does. This log includes not only positive decisions made, but proposals that were rejected or deferred. If you have heard the phrase, “I thought we already decided that . . .” then it’s an indication that you need to record every decision and have it as part of a permanent decision log that is easily accessible by every member. Moreover, a brief record of decisions that can be widely distributed immediately after each Cabinet meeting, provides the reply to the question raised by every educational system during cabinet meeting by those not participating – What are they really doing in there?

4) **Require evidence that is clear, transparent, and traceable.**

“The people are saying” is the phrase used by advocates for a position that is unsupported by evidence. Cabinet members must ask, “Who exactly is saying this, and what evidence do they have to support the claim?” Unfortunately, such a question can be interpreted as reflecting a lack of trust in a colleague and an unproductive conversation ensues:

“What’s the matter, don’t you trust me?”

“Of course I trust you, but I need to see the evidence before supporting this decision.”

“Look, the evidence is my 32 years of experience in this system.”

“No one doubts your experience or trustworthiness, but it’s essential that our decisions are supported by evidence.”

“Well, it sure sounds like distrust to me . . .”

This entire argument could be avoided if there is a norm about the use of clear, transparent, and traceable evidence. Students who write essays are required to support their viewpoints with evidence and examples, and then offer clear citations of their sources. Surely we should expect the same of Cabinet officers.

5) Insist on mutually exclusive decision alternatives.

The typical decision-making protocol for Superintendents and governing boards is for the staff to make a recommendation and request the adoption of a single alternative. This process provides the illusion of unanimity and shields the Superintendent and board from some of the most important elements of the decision-making process – the consideration of alternatives, along with the advantages and disadvantages of each.

Rather than bringing a single recommendation to the CEO on difficult issues, the staff should have at least two alternatives that are mutually exclusive, and each accompanied by advantages and disadvantages. The Cabinet would serve the district better if, before the meeting, each member read and thought about a crisp memorandum – no longer than one or two pages – that had decision recommendations with advantages and disadvantages. There are *always* disadvantages and risks to every alternative. Leaders never make perfect decisions, but rather choose thoughtfully among alternative risks. The vast majority of senior administrators I know are not accustomed to the consideration of alternatives because that requires disagreement among the Cabinet members. Brainwashed into the need for “buy-in,” participants submerge disagreement behind a façade of gentility. Consider for a moment, however, a decision that with the benefit of hindsight, you now know was a bad one. Perhaps it was a technology acquisition, instructional initiative, or hiring decision. Would the bad decision have been avoided, or at least modified, if you had at least one clear alternative and if the Cabinet had a clear-eyed view of the advantages and disadvantages of the decision that it made?

The discipline of mutually exclusive decision alternatives is especially important when committees or task forces make recommendations to the Cabinet. When only a single alternative is presented, it is difficult for the Superintendent to do anything but accept the apparently unanimous recommendation of the group. We must remember, however, that these recommendations are rarely unanimous and, if they were, it is most likely evidence that there was insufficient exploration of alternatives and inadequate consideration of advantages and disadvantages.

6) Say it once – but say it.

At the conclusion of each deliberation, the leader of the meeting should give each member the opportunity to offer observations, affirmations, or reservations. While this is not the time to repeat arguments, it is essential that each member respond to the question, “Is anything left unsaid?” The requirement is that you either say it in the meeting and get it resolved, or the matter is over. The price of membership in the Cabinet is candor. When arguments are held behind closed doors, in the hallways, or parking lot, then the Cabinet and Superintendent are shut out of essential deliberations.

7) **Establish the Cabinet as the face of the system.**

In every Cabinet meeting I have observed, there are some members who check out, not because of a lack of interest, but because the norm has been established that they only participate in matters that pertain to their area of expertise. Thus the cabinet members responsible for facilities and finance rarely ask questions about curriculum and instruction, and vice versa. This is wrong-headed on two counts. First, when members of the community encounter someone who has the rank of “assistant superintendent,” they assume that this person represents the entire school system. If the community is skeptical about a new bond issue or new grading system, it won’t do for them to hear from a top district office, “Sorry – that’s not my responsibility.” The people who vote for and against facilities referenda, for and against ballot measures that directly affect educational policies and resources, and for and against board members, have a right to be informed in a thoughtful and practical way. Second, there is enormous value to the decision-making process when a Cabinet member asks deliberately naïve questions.

“I know I’m not an expert in curriculum and assessment, but I really don’t understand the rationale for the math curriculum you are suggesting.”

“You can take everything I know about technology and put it in a very small bag, but, I’d appreciate it if you would explain how this proposed program will improve the quality of teaching and learning in our system. If I can’t understand it, then I suspect there are many other staff members who will have a hard time with it as well.”

“I know that this new employee benefit system is supposed to be a motivating reward, but I just don’t see how it helps my administrative team. Please walk me through it so that this becomes a motivator and not a burden.”

The decisions ultimately made by the Superintendent during and after a Cabinet meeting must have a clear rationale that can be explained by every member of the senior staff.

Conclusion

Super-charged Cabinets can be the means through which the mission, vision, and values of an educational system come alive. This body of senior leaders can transform ideas into reality, propel the Superintendent’s vision into action, and serve the governing board and community by organizing the entire system around compelling goals.
