

Retreat Summary

Boulder Public Library District Board of Trustees March 2, 2024

On March 2, 2024, the Board of Trustees of the Boulder Public Library District met to look back on its successes in setting up the basic infrastructure of the new district and to chart its path forward as a board. Eric Meade, principal at the [Whole Mind Strategy Group](#), facilitated the session.

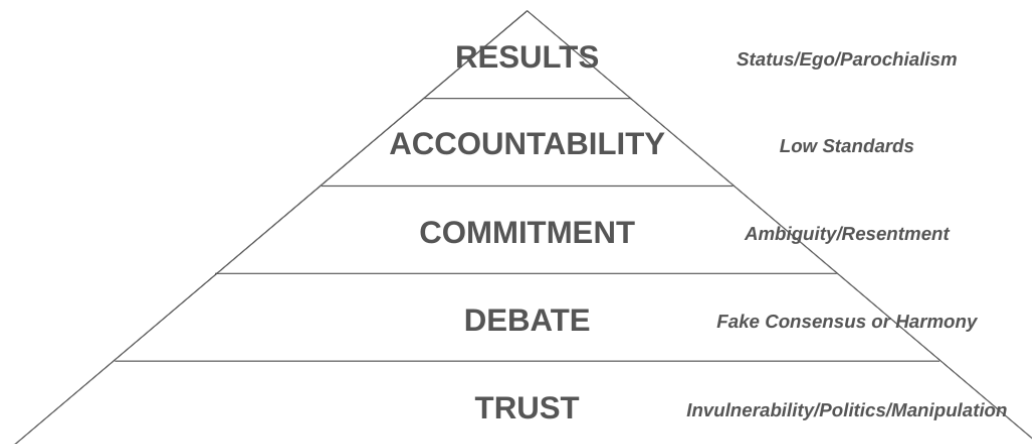
The objectives of the session were as follows:

- To celebrate the Board’s successes in the first year since its formation.
- To know one another better, both as people and as trustees.
- To revisit the Library’s strategic roadmap and the trends at work in the library environment. (This objective was addressed by the library director.)
- To review the principles and practices of board governance, and assess the board’s progress on its journey toward excellence.

This document summarizes the key discussions related to the Board’s progress toward governance excellence and its self-assessment of where it is on that journey.

Becoming a High-Performing Board of Trustees

Eric used a variation on Patrick Lencioni’s model, as shown in the graphic below, from his book, [The Five Dysfunctions of a Team](#), to help the Board envision its journey toward high performance. The words in all-caps show the different attributes of a cohesive team, with each attribute relying on the existence of those below it in the pyramid. The words to the right indicate what emerges if that level’s attribute is missing.



Adapted from Patrick Lencioni’s *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*

Given how new the Board is and how surprising it would be if it had already moved very far up the pyramid toward high performance, Eric focused on the first level of “Trust.” Eric defined trust as what a person feels when they assess that someone else possess the following qualities:¹

- **Sincerity:** They present their intentions accurately; thus, they have a genuine desire to fulfill the commitments they make;
- **Competence:** They have the skills and knowledge necessary to fulfill those commitments; and
- **Reliability:** They have a track record of consistently fulfilling their commitments.

Individual trustees offered their own views on trust, and on the factors conducive to it. They noted:

- The importance of knowing your own strengths and weaknesses, as well as those of others’. This breeds trust by aligning tasks to people’s actual capabilities.
- The importance of knowing others’ motivations—e.g., why they have decided to join the Board. It is generally understood that Trustees are committed to the success of the Library and of the District, but it is also reasonable, given the scale of the commitment inherent in service as a trustee, that trustees would have their own answers to the question, “What’s in it for me?” Sharing that information would help the group build trust, and trustees could even help their colleagues get what they’re looking for in the experience.
- The importance of being honest, transparent, and even vulnerable with others—both being willing to share what one is feeling, and being willing to apologize when one’s performance or behavior comes up short of their commitments. Of course, vulnerability gets easier when there is a general feeling of safety, which is more likely when people share with others information about what would make them feel safe.
- The importance of maintaining trust on an ongoing basis. For example, if someone makes a commitment but later discovers they will not have time to fulfill it per the agreed-upon schedule, maintaining trust (and in particular, the assessment of their *reliability*) requires them to make others aware of that fact, and to renegotiate their commitment. As one trustee noted, an organization must “move at the speed of trust.” When it moves any faster than that, relationships break down and crisis awaits.

¹ This was not discussed in the session, but is worthy of further exploration by the Board: “Trust” is not a blanket assessment, e.g., of someone being good or being bad. Rather, it is tied to a certain commitment. You trust someone *for* something in particular. For example, you may “trust” your assistant to remind you about a project deadline, but you may not trust the same person to do things for you, like entertaining you with trivia or completing advanced mathematical calculations. We trust people for certain things and not for others. It might be useful for the Board to get specific about what they need to trust one another for.

Trustees acknowledged that trust often relies on effective systems and processes for exploring divergent opinions and making decisions together. Because the Board has been moving so quickly to establish the District, it makes sense that some of these systems and processes require further development. The group came back to this topic during the review of the Board self-evaluation.

2024 Board Self-Assessment

Prior to the retreat, all trustees, as well as the library director and the Board's attorney, completed an online board self-assessment survey. The Board reviewed the self-assessment results at the retreat and identified two opportunities for improvement.

Fostering Open, Inclusive, and Effective Discussion

Now that much of the initial “working board” tasks are complete and the District has staff in place to move forward operationally, the Board can slow down to have more robust discussions about the decisions it needs to make. The board packet for the retreat included, for example, a preliminary calendar of the policies the Board will need to set over the coming nine months. All trustees should prepare for those conversations, using the board packets that staff will provide, and be ready to engage in fulsome discussion of the various perspectives that exist on the Board. All trustees should pay attention to the manner of those discussions in order to ensure that all relevant perspectives are aired and considered.

Eric recommended specific techniques that may be useful in fostering this level of discussion, in either a facilitated session or a regular board meeting. For example, facilitators often use a “fishbowl” technique that divides a group in two based on their positions on an issue. Each group then takes a turn discussing the issue among themselves, with the other group silently listening in.² This approach yields two important results:

- First, the listening group is actually listening rather than formulating their responses to what has just been said. Thus, the whole group gets clearer on the nature of the disagreement.
- Second, it becomes clear that even people with the same general position on the issue (e.g., for or against) often have different points of view. This highlights the complexity of the issue and fosters a deeper overall understanding.³

² The listening group can ask questions if something is unclear, but they do not contribute their own perspectives.

³ More information about this technique can be found in [*Whole Mind Facilitation: How to Lead Workshops That Change People, Organizations, and the World*](#), by Eric Meade.

Facilitation techniques aside, it is incumbent upon the participants in a discussion to be candid in sharing their perspectives. On some teams, as in a work setting, an individual team member may withhold opinions for certain reasons, such as fear of losing their job. However, in the case of BPLD, trustees have been appointed by elected leaders to reflect the community and to guide the District in the appropriate direction. Thus, it is essential to that role that trustees speak frankly with one another to share their opinions. This is true for policy issues under consideration by the Board as well as for any concerns they may have about the processes by which the Board convenes, deliberates, or decides.

Making Decisions and Establishing Shared Commitment

As one trustee noted during the discussion of the Lencioni model presented above, there is a “magic” that takes place on high-performing teams when the group makes a decision and commits to it together. This is where they can collaborate most effectively and then hold themselves accountable for doing—and achieving—what they have set out to do.

In [*Process Consultation, Vol. I*](#), organization development pioneer Edgar Schein inventories the various ways people make decisions. The approaches range from the inglorious “plop” of an idea that’s blurted out during the discussion that no explicitly opposes, to decision by majority rule or minority rule, to consensus or even unanimity. Since Schein’s inventory is descriptive rather than prescriptive, what is most important is to know how the group is making the decision. In essence, a group must first decide how to decide. Then, in a board governance context, once the group has decided, everyone must support that decision and speak externally with one voice. Clarifying its decision-making processes, along with ensuring fulsome exploration of various perspectives, will be a critical task in the Board’s movement toward high performance.

A Specific Decision: External Communications from the Board

One specific example of decision-making that the Board addressed at the retreat was how to respond to incoming communications from members of the community. This is an important issue for the Board to consider since support for the Library and the District is not unanimous throughout the community. In fact, a large minority of voters voted against the formation of the District, and some individuals and organizations continue to oppose it. This is to be expected in a functioning democracy, just as it is to be expected that the Board and its members will all do their utmost to successfully implement the voters’ overall decision to form the District.

The Board identified three main categories of people reaching out to the Board, which were dubbed the “three Ps”:

- **Political:** This includes communications from elected officials, as well as from other people or organizations operating at a political level or seeking to influence political processes, such as related to the District’s structures and its tax authority.
- **Patrons:** This includes general inquiries from library users regarding library programs and services that are available, or other specific requests from individuals or organizations.
- **Press:** This includes contacts from the media that often deal with the same issues as “political” communications, but often have strict deadlines since journalists typically work to deadlines.

The Board identified and agreed to the following protocols for these categories of communications:

- **Political:** The Board President, who is empowered by the BPLD by-laws to speak on the behalf of the Board, may respond to this category of communications using recent talking points already agreed to by the Board. When there are no such talking points, or when the relevant talking points are potentially out of date—because of either the passage of time or a recent change in circumstances—the President will bring the communications to the Board, who will discuss and agree whether and how to respond.
- **Patrons:** The President or a Board member receiving such communications is free to respond to such communications after checking with the library director to confirm that the response to be offered is factual, accurate, and appropriate.
- **Press:** Given the timely nature of this category of communications, the President, again empowered by the by-laws, may respond directly based on established talking points or based on the President’s sense of the Board’s opinions on the matter at hand. If time allows, the President may reach out to trustees for feedback on a potential response, and will indicate clearly (e.g., in the subject line of an email) the time by which that feedback is required.

In fact, trustees are advised to mark *all* communications clearly with the nature of action or response required, as well as any relevant deadlines for such action or response.

Having agreed to that general set of protocols for responding to these three categories of communications, the trustees further agreed not to communicate outside of these protocols in their roles as trustees.

Consultant Recommendations

Given how recently the Board was formed, it has already achieved a surprising level of success, and in the process has moved in the direction of high performance. However, building trust—and putting in place *all* of the attributes of team performance described by Lencioni’s model—will take time. Retreats such as the one conducted on March 2, 2024, offer the opportunity to step back, assess how things are going, highlight concerns or opportunities, and have the conversations necessary for moving forward together.

The Whole Mind Strategy Group recommends the following next steps for the Board:

- Take time to have some of the conversations that were not fully explored during the retreat due to the limited time available. Specifically, invite trustees’ to share the various “whys” for their Board service: why they’re on the Board, what they hope to contribute, and “what’s in it for them.”
- Formalize the agreements that were made at the retreat—specifically, the protocols for the Board’s external communications and the agreement by individual trustees not to communicate externally outside those protocols. These agreements can be incorporated into the Board Handbook, which guides and regulates trustee behavior. The revised Board Handbook should then be adopted by the Board in a formal vote.

The Board should feel encouraged in its work by the successes it has already had and by the willingness of all trustees, as was evident during the retreat, to put their concerns on the table and work through them together. With focused attention to the issues identified above, as well as to other issues that will no doubt emerge over time, the Board can confidently move forward in its journey toward high performance.


Sylvia Wirba (Mar 20, 2024 12:09 MDT)

Attestation

03.02.24 BPLD Trustee Retreat Summary

Final Audit Report

2024-03-20

Created:	2024-03-20
By:	Celia Seaton (seatonc@boulderlibrary.org)
Status:	Signed
Transaction ID:	CBJCHBCAABAACOrJIsLfw0iXqo5cnvq9ItLerBsSXnGI

"03.02.24 BPLD Trustee Retreat Summary" History

-  Document created by Celia Seaton (seatonc@boulderlibrary.org)
2024-03-20 - 5:58:22 PM GMT- IP address: 129.19.154.11
-  Document emailed to wirbas@boulderlibrary.org for signature
2024-03-20 - 5:58:43 PM GMT
-  Email viewed by wirbas@boulderlibrary.org
2024-03-20 - 6:09:03 PM GMT- IP address: 91.92.216.199
-  Signer wirbas@boulderlibrary.org entered name at signing as Sylvia Wirba
2024-03-20 - 6:09:20 PM GMT- IP address: 8.53.131.227
-  Document e-signed by Sylvia Wirba (wirbas@boulderlibrary.org)
Signature Date: 2024-03-20 - 6:09:22 PM GMT - Time Source: server- IP address: 8.53.131.227
-  Agreement completed.
2024-03-20 - 6:09:22 PM GMT