

ADVISORY BOARDS:

Gateway to Business

ENGAGEMENT

BY HANS MEEDER AND BRETT PAWLOWSKI

In every conference we've attended this year, we've seen sessions about how to build or manage an effective business advisory board. Interest has been growing quickly in these types of models for two reasons: First, because career and technical education (CTE) programs can only succeed by staying relevant to the needs of local businesses; and second, because advisory boards are one of the most effective vehicles for generating support of all kinds from the community.

Workshops on this subject often address an important set of issues, which we will cover in this article:

- Do we need to create a business advisory board for our program?
- How should we go about building and managing a board?
- If we already have a board, how do we focus and energize the board?

Do We Need to Create a Board?

On a recent site visit in Illinois that Hans Meeder conducted, he heard from the teacher/manager of a well-regarded CTE program. This particular engineering program uses a national curriculum; as part of the program certification visit three years beforehand, the program leader was reminded of the need (a requirement) to create a business advisory board. The program leader explained that when he created the advisory board, it unleashed a torrent of business interest and involvement. The business members became very excited about the program, and as they surveyed the real needs of local businesses, they realized the existing engineering program wasn't expansive enough.

They determined that an advanced manufacturing/precision machining program was also needed to complement the current engineering program. With the advisory board's guidance and

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advocacy, the school district agreed to create the ancillary CTE program and hire an additional teacher to support it, thus broadening the overall scope of the program. With business donations and district funding, several hundred thousand dollars worth of high-tech equipment was procured, and the program now boasts a state-of-the-art lab. The program leader explained that creating a business



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advisory board had nothing less than “a transformational effect” on his program.

Why was the advisory board transformational? First, the program leader welcomed the real and substantive input of the advisory board. The board retained a legal “advisory” status, but their input was considered seriously. Second, the organization of the board provided a concrete tool for substantive business connection to the program. While “drive-by” involvement of business through field trips and guest speakers are valuable components of business involvement, nothing

can replace the regular and consistent business input that an advisory board offers. Third, this consistent input allowed the program to more fully align to the real needs of the local economy—thus the program became more relevant and robust. This increased enthusiasm among employers, teachers and, ultimately, the students.

How Should We Go About Building and Managing a Board?

Done right, an advisory board will be an important facet of your program,

and it should be treated as such. It is an investment—not an expense. If you see the board as simply a compliance activity, meeting your obligations may be all you’ll get out of it. But if you truly understand the benefits your board can provide to your program, you will give it the time and professionalism it deserves. This topic is an important one, so this spring we are writing a guidebook that fully covers it, and the book will be published by the Association for Career and Technical Education. Here are a few highlights from this new book:

1. Recruit the right people to your board; don't just fill it with willing, warm bodies.

2. Don't just look at job titles in choosing potential recruits. Try to create a good mix of temperaments and talents.

1. Recruit the right people to your board; don't just fill it with willing, warm bodies. You need members who can help you fulfill the following goals:

- Connect you and your program with your community and region.
- Help you see your operation from an outside perspective.
- Provide the community with a window to see what you have to offer.
- Offer a high-altitude oversight function.
- Identify or plan a strategic fit between your programs and the current and future needs of the regional workforce.

Given these primary facets of a successful board, it becomes easier to identify the types of individuals who can provide the greatest value to your program. You'll want to consider some or all of the following:

- Representatives from some of the larger, more established employers in industries relevant to your programs; these individuals will make up a substantial percentage of your board.
- Representatives from some of the

smaller, faster-moving "gazelle" companies in industries relevant to your program; these individuals may be harder to find but they offer spark and creativity, and make sure your program is plugged into the future of the industry sector.

- Professionals from the largest related postsecondary programs in the area.
- A union leader if employment in one or more of your programs is heavily unionized.
- A senior executive with extensive management experience, particularly to fill the oversight role.
- A leader from the local Chamber of Commerce and/or Workforce Development Board, who can not only advise you on industries you do not currently serve, but can also help you make numerous connections in the community.
- Others who may be helpful, depending on availability and importance within the local workforce market: representative of trade media, foundation director (if funding focuses on your area of expertise).
- Past students, or parents of current/former students, may also provide helpful perspective on the program from a user point of view. If you have a parent of a student or former student who also works in your designated industry sector, you've scored a double-win.
- Members of local professional associations that represent a particular industry or career field. They will already be active in promoting the growth of their career field, and are particularly attuned to the education and training needs within their chosen career field.
- **Caution:** AVOID filling business seats with individuals who are essentially solo-entrepreneurs, providing business-to-business services, and who may see the board role as primarily a marketing or promo-

tional opportunity. Your board's business representatives should be from companies that actually have the capacity and need to hire the workers your program produces.

2. Second, in your recruiting, don't just look at job titles in choosing potential recruits. Try to create a good mix of temperaments and talents with the following professional assets in mind:

Knowledge—First and foremost, each of your board members should have a deep base of knowledge in his or her respective fields. In addition to industry knowledge, you should also keep an eye out for individuals who can bring other types of knowledge to the table: an understanding of board management, budgets and finance, fundraising, partnership development, marketing and public relations, or other functions you decide are important.

Experience—Experience is related to knowledge, of course, but here we're referring to the amount of relevant experience your ideal board members should have. For your purposes, look for someone with at least five years of experience.

Network—Every board member at your table represents dozens, or even hundreds, of additional potential contacts you can call on as needed. To maximize your networking, get a variety of companies and organizations and communities represented.

Resources—Try to seek some board members with the ability to locate funding, staff, equipment, connections, media exposure, legislative reach, student/staff opportunities or other kinds of benefits. With these, it becomes much easier for you to build and sustain vibrant programs.

Interpersonal Skills—While your board does not need to become a group of best friends, the ability to work pleasantly with others is important if you want to build a sustainable and attractive board. Individuals with bad attitudes or confrontational styles can sap enthusiasm and sow discord, resulting in others not wanting to participate and causing defections and a reluctance on the part of prospective new members to sign on.

Time—Often people assume that busy people are the best people to recruit. They're in demand, after all, which must mean that they are valuable. But it's possible that busy people are overcommitted, and despite their best intentions, simply don't have the "bandwidth" to take on one more commitment. When recruiting board members, make sure that they have the time available to participate.

Passion—Board members must have a real interest in your work, either for your importance to their industry, the opportunities you're providing to children, or both. Without passion, it will be hard to motivate them to act and to get them to call on their other resources.

Responsible—You want people who can commit to something and fulfill their obligations, regardless of their role on the board. As you seek referrals, make sure to ask if the person has a reputation for getting things done.

Fills One of Three Key Roles—People generally fall into one of three categories: Thinker, Manager, and Doer. A Thinker can be particularly helpful to you in analysis and planning; a Manager can lead committees or campaigns; and a Doer does the hard, hands-on work necessary for your board to succeed. While you'll

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A POWERFUL BOARD."

want most of your people to be Doers, keep an eye out also for people to fill these other roles; your board will be incomplete without them.

To effectively manage your board, give it clear direction, substantive questions to attend to, and actively respond to each of their recommendations. Even if you don't want to, or can't, adopt their recommendations, engage in an honest dialogue about every serious recommendation.

If We Already Have a Board, How Do We Energize It?

Maybe you've been complying with state or local requirements to have an advisory board, but it's a board in name only. This is a COMMON problem. There are a number of possible solutions, but in general you probably need to revisit the basic purposes and processes for the program. Create a "constitutional convention" for your board where you revisit and update the basic claims and purposes for the board. At some point, you may need to dissolve the board and release board members from their current terms of service. Now you can re-recruit some of the existing members and seek new members to better meet the new board's needs. Create clear expectations, processes and time commitments for your new board.

The number one priority is to focus on

the quality of the program, its effectiveness in meeting the needs of students and employers, and creating a culture of action and excellence. If these become the hallmarks of your program and board operations, it will give fresh life to your board.

As our colleague in Illinois told us, a strong advisory board can have a transformational effect on your CTE program. Ultimately, a transformed program will have a deep impact on your students. With clear structure, and an attention to recruiting the right people and managing with excellence, you can build or re-energize a powerful board. Don't let the busyness of day-to-day teaching allow you to miss this tremendous opportunity. **I**

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