

Employment Advice for Principals

Recent times have seen principals in various settings, coming into conflict with their board. In a number of cases the conflict has ended badly for the principal, and even when it hasn't ended badly, the ensuing stress is very high.

There are some simple principles which NZPF believes should guide our practice and we urge you to consider them in your own context.

The following notes are only intended to provide very brief and generalised "common sense" advice.

1. Relationships

The best way to avoid relationship problems is to ensure that they don't arise in the first place. The key to good relationships is communication, and as the professional leader of the school, principals need to deliberately reflect on the quality of current communication between themselves and the board, and particularly the Chair. Principals should take it upon themselves to ensure that relationships are positive, and should initiate regular catch-ups with the Chair. It is wise to make some file notes afterwards as a record of what was discussed.

How do you rate your relationship with the Board chair?

Relationships - Self-Reflection

Poor				Outstanding
1	2	3	4	5
Seldom talk, never meet, little respect, no warmth		Professional, but neither warm nor negative. Share only what I have to		My "go-to" person, no secrets, great advice, mutual respect, high trust

2. Transparency

Board reports provide a regular disciplined way to keep your board fully informed. Using an agreed report structure that picks up all the main strands of school life assists report writing and allows a systematic review of ALL important events and activities, and the opportunity to support decisions and actions with details and. Board reports of course, become part of a formal record of meetings, and as such are a useful document to refer back to if memories fail.

- Any important decisions involving the principal's delegated authority should always be minuted, whether it refers to your future attendance at a conference, or a decision you have made to employ a staff member
- All spending should be within policy guidelines, budget expectations, and agreed delegations
- Reimbursements should follow policy guidelines, and should be independently signed off by a board member
- All decisions taken by school management should line up with current policy. The board sets policy, and the principal applies it. If a decision is taken which fails to follow policy, it will quickly lead to you not having a leg to stand on

- If other strands of work start to take you out of the school for extended periods, ensure that you have kept your senior management and board fully informed of the purpose of the activities and explain how it benefits your school, as well as the wider sector. You may also wish to highlight the work's relevance to the career path steps in your Collective Agreement

How transparent are you with your Board?

Transparency Self-Reflection

Poor				Outstanding
1	2	3	4	5
Keep board reports short and sweet, and there's a lot I don't tell them. I never share my mistakes. What is policy?		I cover things that are significant but there are sometimes issues that I don't share. I follow most policy		Comprehensive board reports which are well received and provide detailed background on all important issues, and link it to school policy

3. Financial Probity

Is your financial management above reproach? The use of the school credit card holds the highest potential for miss-use, and if you do have good policies, are you following them? Do you have the accounts approved for payment at every meeting and transactions listed? We are now hearing of principals who are going back to the "more is better" approach, and ensuring that every transaction is visible to the Board. The money always matters, and it is either accurately managed, or there are questions to answer. Using a third party provider such as Education Services Ltd provides an extra layer of protection, as too does ensuring that your in-house financial manager is meticulous in her management of accounts for payment, and cash. Some schools continue to ensure there is a board member allocated to the role of finance.

How robust is your school's financial management?

Financial Self-Reflection

Poor				Outstanding
1	2	3	4	5
I rely on others to get this right – I'm pretty busy on other stuff		I engage with the money when I am getting ready for board meetings, but they have given me quite a lot of freedom to use the credit card		I am meticulous with the school's money, and the credit card. My office manager is a real Nazi

4. School Leadership and Direction

Leading a school is often tricky, but never more than when you are leading significant change in your school, or even more problematically, leading change in a *new* (to you) school. If staff feel that change is happening too quickly, or they don't like the general direction of travel, they may use their pre-existing relationships with board members or school parents, or both, to lobby and undermine the principal. Principals need to recognise that risk, and take steps to manage it *before* the board reacts adversely or loses confidence in you.

Another risk occurs when the principal feels that there are difficult or entrenched staff to move. Again, full communication to the board about this type of challenge is critical.

Things to consider include:

- Ensuring that you have briefed the board on the challenge ahead
- Warned them not to buy in to any lobbying, but to raise concerns directly with you
- Reflect on the change challenge, and discuss it openly with staff, recognising how they might be feeling
- Provide opportunities to touch base or seek anonymous feedback so that you can see issues looming, early

How big is your challenge right now?

Change Management Self-Reflection

Poor				Outstanding
1	2	3	4	5
The staff need to get with the programme. I know what I'm doing, and if they don't like it, they should just leave		It's hard work and I try to manage it, but I know that there is some muttering out there		I have been very careful to keep the board fully informed, and I have regularly touched base with staff on how they feel about our direction

5. Appraisal

Every year you should take active steps to ensure that you have been independently and rigorously appraised in a board approved process. Rather than something to try and avoid, embrace the process as an opportunity to develop and strengthen your leadership, to demonstrate transparency, to model professional conduct, and to build a body of supporting evidence to support you if things should go wrong.

It is not helpful to use a personal friend or trusted colleague, if the person and the process do not have the full support of your board.

What does your appraisal look and feel like?

Appraisal Self-Reflection

Poor				Outstanding
1	2	3	4	5
It's a person I've worked with for years, knows me inside out. We just have a bit of a chat really. In fact, did he even do one last year?		It's a decent process, though I seldom get much from it. Keeps the board happy though and I always make sure it happens		Rigorous appraisal by board selected person, 360 degree feedback, focus groups of staff, parents, and children all add to the mix. It's all a bit scary

6. Interviews with Staff

Always make written notes following any interview with a staff member. If possible, ensure that there is a second person present at any meeting with staff.

- If a concern emerges with a staff member, ask the line manager closest to the person to hold the first meeting and only escalate it if that fails to resolve it

- If an investigation is to be held, ensure that the appointed investigator is qualified and independent enough to operate with the confidence of all parties
- Follow the procedures as specified within school policy and the Collective Agreement in dealing with all complaints, and all incidents relating to staff behaviour and performance

How well do you conduct interviews with staff, children, and parents?

Interviews - Self-Reflection

Poor				Outstanding
1	2	3	4	5
I largely rely on my memory, or some notes on a piece of paper. Don't like doing these interviews in front of others		Well I do take notes usually, but I know I have misplaced a fair few. Sometimes there is someone present. Could easily get caught out		I make detailed notes which are always signed and dated. I always have someone present

7. Complacency

As the years roll past it may become easy to coast along merrily, and ignore some of the principles of good practice listed. An annual reflection as part of your appraisal might be a good way to monitor and ensure that your standards have not slipped.

Are you becoming complacent?

Complacency - Self-Reflection

Poor				Outstanding
1	2	3	4	5
I think that my relationships are sweet, and I know that I am slack on some of these issues, but can't see it ever being a problem for me		I think about how things are going, but it's kind of hard to judge. It's not really a big part of my self-review		Rigorous appraisal by board selected person, and always reflect on my performance and consider issues where things might need to tighten up

8. Legal Advice

The clear vision provided by hindsight is often too late for a principal under threat. Actions and admissions made without good advice can make matters worse, so early professional advice is critical. That advice is best when it comes from a lawyer who will be there for the long haul, and taking various pieces of advice from friends or a recommended contact may not be the best way forward.

- Seek early advice from a professional, and understand your options and their associated costs
- Reflect honestly about the issue – is it time for you to exit and try and settle without the expense of a lengthy battle? That may allow you to maintain your most important asset – your reputation
- Don't seek multiple sources of advice and then cherry pick what advice you will take and what you won't

Have you got a reliable source for legal advice?

Legal Advice – Self-Reflection

Poor				Outstanding
1	2	3	4	5
I'm pretty experienced and usually know what to do		I always get heaps of advice from friends – often it's a bit contradictory		I have solid legal advice and always seek their input early