Productive School Governance: Success Case Studies from New Zealand

Abstract

The rhetoric abounds concerning the types of effective, high trust, interactions that should exist for a school governing body. In practise, however, such interactions are often difficult to define, establish, maintain, and sustain. The study reported on in this paper attempted to identify interactions linked to perceptions of high trust via a 'success case study' examination of characteristics of productive and defensive strategies utilised by three New Zealand (NZ) primary level school governing bodies (Boards of Trustees) that had been identified as being effective. All three schools exhibited strong productive interactions where open, evidence based, discussions predominated in a dialogue (informed debate) context. The case studies provide a set of indicators that illustrate the detailed strategies that can be employed that lead to effectiveness and high trust.

The initial section of the paper backgrounds the governance context in NZ schools where locally elected Boards of Trustees (hereafter described at Boards) hold high levels of responsibility and autonomy for strategic and policy decisions. Following this, the link between effectiveness of Boards and productive interactions is established. The theoretical underpinnings of defensive and productive approaches are explored prior to a description of the success case methodology employed to examine the interactions of effective Boards. The results of the three case studies are presented and overall conclusions drawn. The final part of the paper explores an approach to adopting the type of productive values and strategies that the case studies highlight.

Background Literature

There are two key areas of literature associated with this study: the first is that of school governance, and the second is productive interactions.

Governance

In 1989 NZ school governance bodies were accorded local self-management responsibility and decision-making (within accountability frameworks). Subsequently, an elected body (primarily parents) was delegated a high degree of autonomy and responsibility for policy and strategic direction for a school (Carver, 1997) – a role that has been further enhanced under the more recent Education Act (Government of New Zealand, 1989) requiring Boards to engage in strategic planning.

Few empirical studies have reported on the impact of this self-management in NZ. Although Rentoul and Rosanowski (2000) recorded little evidence of a causal relationship between self-management and educational outcomes, Wylie (2007) notes that the role of the Board is more indirect:

> …and most likely to influence the ability of professional leaders to develop and sustain the school culture, capability, and capacity (p. 6).

Wylie and King (2004, 2005), in their study of effective schools' financial decision-making, indicated the importance of Boards and principals working as partners, with shared decision-

making helping to develop mutual understanding, openness, respect, and trust. The relationship between the chair and the principal is linked to Board effectiveness in NZ also in the work of Mitchell, Cameron and Wylie (2002), and Robinson and Ward (2005).

Studies conducted in England and Wales similarly indicated outcomes of effective Board interactions. Earley and Creese (2003), for example, identified that such interactions provided a critical and informed sounding board for the headteacher. The authors emphasised the importance of genuine partnerships and the headteacher sharing leadership. Scanlon, Earley, and Evans (1999) noted that highly effective boards had trust and support in the relationship between the head and governors, where governors could challenge and question where necessary. Ranson, Farrell, Penn and Smith (2005) suggested that good governance was associated with partnerships of mutual support between the head and governors.

The latter qualities of trust, partnership, support, and challenge are linked to 'productive' (Argyris, 1996, 2003) interactions and it could be concluded that if Board members (trustees) and principals participate in such interactions then the principal's capacity might be enhanced. Conversely, if the relationship is obstructive or detrimental, their capacity could be diminished.

Successive studies by Wylie (1990, 2002, 2007) in NZ have indicated relatively good relationships between Boards and the principal/staff with the rate of difficulties in 2006 standing at approximately 12% to 15%. The Cardno, France, Smith and Youngs (2005) study of Board chairs, and the Hodgen and Wylie (2005) study of principal stress and wellbeing, have similarly reported good Board chair and principal relationships.   However, despite such reports of good relationships, Wylie (2007) has noted that a constant theme in sector meetings in recent years has been that of poor Board-principal relationships.

Productive Interactions

Before examining productive interactions, it is important to consider inhibitors to such relationships. When individuals or groups get into difficult, or high conflict, situations they often resort to defensive behaviours. Argyris (1990, 1996, 2003) defines defensiveness as the tendency to protect ourselves and others from potential threat and embarrassment and it is exemplified in such strategies as covering up or bypassing threat; being indirect with people, giving mixed messages, or withholding information. The strategies are often summarized as avoidance and control, although, in this author's experience, avoidance often manifests as a manipulative form of control. The essential features of control in a defensive approach have been summarized in the following way:

> ... people seek to win rather than lose and to do so with a minimum of unpleasantness. People strive to win by keeping control of both the process and the content of key conversations. They make unilateral judgements about how to interpret information, and about the goals to pursue and how to achieve them. In addition, they seek to involve others in way that protects their own judgements from challenge. (Robinson, Absolum, Cardno, & Steele, 1990, p. 2)

Dick and Dalmau (1999) further summarise defensiveness as an approach which is "adversarial, competitive, and narrowly rational" (p. 47). In problem situations, when individuals are likely to resist control, or when change is threatening, avoidance and control are usually ineffective and are anti-learning processes that lead to misunderstandings and distortions.

Learning to overcome defensiveness initially requires individuals to look at the way that they personally are implicated in problems. Argyris (1990) states that such learning involves problem solving so that problems remain solved via a 'double-loop learning' approach that is often labeled as productive reasoning (Argyris, 1990; Cardno, 2001; Piggot-Irvine, 2005; Piggot-Irvine & Cardno, 2005; Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton & Kleiner, 2000). Such reasoning involves a balancing act between the two predominant features of advocacy and inquiry. Advocacy includes stating a position, and disclosing views and premises and hard data (evidence) supporting that position, in such a way that it is hypothetical (not predetermined in terms of outcomes) and invites evaluation, challenge, and public testing. Inquiry includes encouraging and non-defensively receiving others' views and disagreements without prejudgement, the testing of one's position, and checking perceptions in ways which reveal implicit and explicit assumptions. The overuse or underuse of either advocacy or inquiry can result in either defensive controlling or avoidance strategies. Advocacy and inquiry should create a genuine two-way dialogue, or informed debate, between individuals which leads to a mutual understanding and agreement about issues, even if the agreement is to disagree.

> … participants should seek to understand the basis of relevant disagreements and, if possible, to resolve them through debating the ... basis of the differing claims and their practical consequences (Robinson, 1992, p. 349).

Once this empirically informed debate that Robinson refers to has occurred then solutions to problems can be mutually agreed upon, improvements planned for, implemented, and monitored in ways which enable individuals to be responsible for their own decisions. Bilaterality (two sidedness), or sometimes multilaterality if more than two people are involved, underpins every facet of the productive reasoning approach. This informed mutual checking of meaning, understanding, perspective, and agreement, is central to the success of the approach. In summary, the critical elements of productive reasoning, according to Dick and Dalmau (1999), include being "more consensual, more open to change" and as an approach it "provides more opportunity for choice" (p. 47).

The features of defensive and productive reasoning underpinned the development of criteria (see Table 2) for the data collection tools for examining effective Board interactions. In particular, the areas of productive relationships linked to trust, decision-making underpinned by evidence, as well as openness to development and change were the focus of the investigation.

Methodology

Success Case Design

A predominantly qualitative set of success case studies (Brinkerhoff, 2003) were undertaken to gather the required empirical data on productive governance. Success case studies are a subset of the more traditional case study method where a single unit analysis is based upon depth that is both holistic and exhaustive (Bassey, 2007) but which also retains the meaningful characteristics of realistic events. A case study investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context (Wetherell, 2003) and is especially powerful when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Yin, 1994).

The success case method (SCM) described by Brinkerhoff (2005) is designed to find out how well an organisational initiative (in this case Board interactions) is working. The first step in SCM is the employment of a literature review to identify elements associated with success that are then collated into a matrix (or matrices) outlining the criteria for investigation. In the current study, the literature and research on productive and defensive strategies and values as

well as effective Boards/governance was reviewed in order to establish the criteria. The latter, in turn, were used to identify the cases that were effective or successful. The second step in SCM is the employment of a mixed method approach to data collection to exhaustively examine a specific context.

In the SCM there is no intent to examine a range, or modal, responses. Only the most effective cases are investigated in order to highlight features of excellence that can be transferred to other contexts. In this study a variety of data collection tools was employed in order to provide a comprehensive perspective on effective interactions.

Data Collection Tools

The combination of data collection tools employed was designed to enhance rigour (and credibility in terms of validity and reliability) via cross-checking, or triangulation, of information (Denzin, 1997). As noted earlier, each tool was developed using the matrix criteria associated with effective interactions. The multiple perspectives of productive governance were accumulated via trustee surveys, meeting observations and documentary analysis [particularly the national auditing body Education Review Office (ERO) reports] in order to show the skills, strategies, and knowledge employed by trustees on successful Boards. Espousals (trustee self-report in the survey) and practice (via observations, and documentary analysis) were explored in order to determine if a gap in perceptions was evident.

The survey was issued to all trustees. It included both open-ended (qualitative) and closed (quantitative) questions and collected both factual and attitudinal information (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000; Hinds, 2000). Open-ended questions were designed to determine trustee perceptions of Board interpersonal relationships, attitudes to development, approaches to decision-making, and change management. Closed questions (a checklist focusing particularly on defensive and productive strategies) sought to elicit more specific information about interactions. Criteria numbered 1 to 21 in the checklist (see Table 2) were linked to defensive strategies and those numbered 21 onwards were productive. Trustees completed this survey individually at the beginning of a Board meeting.

Observation of a full formal Board meeting was conducted using an observation schedule that mirrored the survey content. A tally of either defensive or productive strategies was completed under the observation column in the closed question checklist. This non-participant, semi-structured, observation was therefore specific, with the observer deciding on the focus against a pre-determined set of categories.

The third data collection method was that of documentary analysis. ERO reports for the previous six years for each school were examined to identify specific statements associated with governance relationships and development (see Table 1 for the summary).

Ethics and Sampling/Selection of 'Success' Sites

Full ethics consent to conduct the study was obtained from the Unitec Ethics Committee and a carefully constructed informed consent process was enacted. A purposive approach to sampling was utilised where coaches involved in training and development with Boards in the Northland and Auckland regions of NZ were asked to nominate cases which they considered fulfilled the criteria of success in terms of productive strategies and values. Only three out of approximately 100 primary sector Boards were nominated. The Board chair and principal in each of these three sites were initially contacted by telephone and e-mail, with a follow-up letter. An outline of the nature of the project, the contribution that the individual school would

make to the research, and the nature and extent of their involvement was provided to each Board as well as assurance that participants and their school would only be identified by pseudonym in the report. Participants were also informed that the collated information would be returned to them for confirmation prior to dissemination. A summary of the characteristics of the three sites is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of Characteristics of the Three Success Sites

	Site A	Site B	Site C
No. of students (2007)	70	28	406
Location	Rural	Rural	Urban
Decile (socio-economic rating of school, 1=low: 10 = high)	5	2	6 (Catholic)
Cultural mix of students	74% Non-Māori: 26% Māori*	26 Māori: 2 Non-Māori	23% Māori: 77% Non-Māori
External ERO report comment	2001 - Board had sound governance and worked positively with the principal. Trustees seen to take an active and enthusiastic interest in the organisation and operations of the school.

2005 - concerns raised by new principal about planning and reporting, consultation with Māori, school self-review, and teacher performance. These issues were confirmed by ERO as areas of non-compliance.

2006 – new Board committed to good governance and management, as evidenced in their shared vision, a strategic planning framework, improved financial management, and trustee understanding of the critical relationships between governance and management, and self-review. | 2002 - trustees seen to be a united team who worked collaboratively in partnership with the principal. They were well informed and supported by the principal in their new roles. Principal leadership was seen to be a strength.

2004 - a special review conducted to report on governance and management concerns raised from external sources Growing tension between the principal and the Board contributed to the principal's resignation. A new principal took up his position at the beginning of the 2005 school year.

2006 – a committed and conscientious Board. | 2003 – school had a strong sense of family. School leadership promoted the values of transparency, openness and consultation. The Board was seen to be comprised of committed trustees with diverse skills.

2007 - Board was seen to provide sound governance. |

* Māori are the indigenous people of NZ

Results

Survey, observation and documentary analysis results are collectively drawn upon in the reporting of results for each school. Where qualitative comments are noted, bracketed numbers refer to the number of trustees responding in exactly the same way. Where no bracket is included this indicates one trustee only responding with a comment. Table 2 provides a summary of the predominant interactive processes employed in each Board.

Table 2: Survey and Observation Results

Some, or all, Board members exhibit:-	School A Survey	School A Observ.	School B Survey	School B Observ.	School C Survey	School C Observ.
1.With-holding information in important conversations						
2.Failing to state their position/where they were coming from when discussing issues						
3.Making judgements or assumptions about people without checking them						
4.Failing to check what other people thought about any information						
5.Using persuasion to get what they want			1	11	2	11
6.Giving false reassurances to people to cloud their messages						
7.Giving mixed messages or confusing the message in an effort to be nice					1	
8.Trying to keep things comfortable and therefore avoiding problems					2	
9.Deciding on the outcome before any conversation about issues						
10.Deciding to hold back information in order to protect others from embarrassment or threat	1					
11.Naming dropping when they need to support their argument						
12.Ignoring or downplaying information provided by others						
13.Making statements without illustration, evidence, or explanation						
14.Using questioning in order to disguise their own view						
15.Ignoring the feelings/responses of others						
16.Avoiding disclosing their own feelings						
17.Avoiding disclosing information that may have upset others, or weakened their position						
18.Providing their own solutions to any problems without inviting other input for their solutions					1	11
19.Taking responsibility for following up any problems themselves rather than including others	1				1	
20.Failing to plan for any improvement where problems might have been raised						
21.A lot of deciding to 'give it to them straight' (a blasting!) if there are problems to resolve	2					

22.Sharing control by exposing rather than withholding key information	3	111111	2	111	5	1
23.Making it clear what their own position was (in an open way)	4	111111111	5	111111	7	11111
24.Sharing responsibility for goal achievement	5	1111111	5	1111111	9	11111
25.Disclosing their views and the evidence (hard data) or logic that leads to those views	4	111	3	11	9	111
26.Openness to inviting challenge, evaluation, and public testing of any views disclosed	5	1111	4	111111	9	1111111
27.Treating views of others as points to be checked rather than predetermined outcomes	4	111111	4	1111	9	111
28.Finding out about others' views	5	1111111	5	111111	9	1111111
29.Encouraging, and non-defensively receiving, others' views and disagreements without pre-judgemer	5	1111111	6	1111111	9	11111
30.Seeking mutually acceptable solutions and taking joint responsibility for planning, implementing, and monitoring of achievement of goals	5	11111	6	111	9	11111
31.Managing difficult emotional issues as a joint responsibility	4		5		9	

Case Study School A

Relationships

In the survey responses, all five trustees noted that there were open, transparent, relationships between all trustees and as one stated "no-one is afraid to say what they think." High trust was described as an outcome of Board interactions (3), but one respondent stated that there was still more work needed on trust – it was seen as "work in progress." Positive relationships and working well together were perceived to be outcomes linked to trust (2) and good all round communication and interactions were associated with this (3).

In terms of the ways that the outcomes of trust might be achieved, openness and honesty were seen as key (2) with one trustee suggesting that the Board used lots of opportunities for discussion. The trustees stated that a variety of methods of communication were utilised to enhance openness including email, phone calls, written reports circulated prior to meetings, and the principal and Board Chair being in constant communication. Two trustees felt that because they were a complementary team, with the right mix of people, they communicated well. Trustees noted the following additional impacting factors: a desire for transparency; the previous Board having hidden agendas – they wanted something different now (2); everyone adhering to establishing trust; liking each other for who they are; working together with the same goal (2) – "on the same page," a willingness to learn and up-skill; allowing people to use their specific skills and aptitudes; supporting and respecting individuals in their own culture and personal circumstance; general respect for each other; having a critical mass wanting to be open; high ownership; people acknowledging when they are wrong and when things are not working; doing things in the right order (they created a code of ethics first and made people aware that they either accepted this or left); working hard to make sure everyone operated as a team not individuals; having great leaderships on the Board; using good processes but always tweaking things to improve; and having effective and efficient meetings, including keeping to time.

The following trustee comment summed up the tenor of the responses:

> The Board feels a comfortable place to share concerns/ideas. Some trustees do need support to share but the chair asks if they have anything to add. The principal is also inclusive and nurtures others to be involved.

Another stated:

> All make an effort to be a team and allow each other to shine, involved and be a part of what is happening.

Trustees were also seen to get along well with staff, although one noted that whilst good, there were still some glitches with relationships. The Board relationship with the principal (who is a trustee) was seen to very open (4), with one trustee referring to the fact that the relationship was "open and questioning, challenging."

When asked, in the survey, to summarise the Board interactions, trustees noted that they were productive and open (3): completely non-defensive. As one stated: "All members can speak freely with a sense of pride and respect". Another suggested that:

> We all try to work together with what skills we have to improve the growth and development at school. We speak our minds and don't hold back if we don't agree with

something. We have ongoing and open communication. We accept responsibility for our actions. This has been tiring at times but paid off in the end.

Length of Time it Took to Establish Mutual Trust

The survey responses from trustees indicated that it took between approximately six months, a year, and 18 months (2) to establish mutual trust. One noted that improvement was on-going, and another that each new trustee that had come in had bought into the open, trusting environment and culture.

Defensiveness Versus Productive Strategies

One trustee stated in the survey that there was a tendency to defensiveness but then everyone moved on: "Never any grudges held over disagreements – we can agree to disagree". All five trustees stated in some way or another that there was little defensiveness, or if it did occur it was short lived. The 'survey' column in Table 2 shows that only three defensive strategies were reported (Nos. 10, 19, 21). The first of these is an avoidance strategy and the next two are controlling. All other strategies recorded are productive.

The dominant productive strategies that trustees believed they employed involved taking shared responsibility for goal achievement, openness to challenge, finding out about others' views, non-defensively receiving others' views, and seeking joint solutions. The Chair made a particular note of the dedication of the whole Board to share information and power. She stated that even though she met with the principal regularly they were particularly careful not to pre-empt any Board decisions.

The survey checklist was also used as an observation template for the meeting. There were no defensive strategies (criteria in Table 2 numbered 1 to 21) observed during the meeting. The dominant (recorded nine times) strategy employed was that of making it clear what a trustee's position was, followed by taking shared responsibility for goal achievement, finding out about others' views, and non-defensively receiving others' views.

In summary, there is some concurrence between the survey (trustee perceptions) and the observation record with three out of the four criteria common in the results.

Attitude to Development

The survey results suggested that both the Board overall, and particularly the principal, were passionate about the need to move forward and were genuinely committed to development (2). The principal and the whole Board often attended professional development together and the principal was involved in further study as well as a learning community cluster. The principal was seen by trustees to be very focused on development and open to improving his own learning (2), and committed to the professional development and up-skilling of staff and trustees. The principal himself stated that he was eager to get development and was passionate about teaching and learning.

The meeting observation revealed two lengthy discussions linked to development. In both situations, all trustees were excited about the possibility of further Board development. When the principal discussed his involvement in a national contract his passion was evident and other trustees were strongly encouraging of his involvement.

Use of Best Practice or Data in Board Decision-making

Good use of achievement data to direct achievement was seen to be made by the Board in the survey response (2). Trustees stated that they used data and information from research/best practice to make decisions (3) and kept up to date with readings. Collectively they said they had sought Board training to assist with this. The meeting observation confirmed the use of data. On three occasions in the meeting children's achievement was discussed and in each case data was referred to support the discussion.

Openness to Change

It was evident that this Board was open to change. One trustee considered that they were very forward thinking: another that they dealt with change well and had good discussion where needed. The latter trustee also noted that they did not change just for the sake of change. Change was seen as an on-going process. The following quote sums up the conversation associated with change:

> We have hardly sat still in the last 2-3 years. It's been constant change. Mostly positive, but it's more difficult when its negative but we have still dealt openly with these.

Case Study B

Relationships

Each of the seven School B trustees noted in the survey that good or excellent relationships existed. Trustees also reported that they worked: co-operatively and openly (6); honestly (5); supportively, with mutual respect (2); in a friendly and relaxed environment, with nothing held back or misleading (2); without backstabbing or defensiveness (2); and with good communication (3). One trustee stated "we are able to express our opinions and talk despite our titles – parent to principal or teacher." In keeping with this, a further respondent said: "We operate as a functional Whanau (family) – our differences are sorted quickly." Another suggested:

> A number of the Board members have known each other for years and many are related which provides an open attitude to discuss many topics and a trust between us. They welcomed me in on the Board even tough I am new to area. They treated me just the same.

All trustees stated that there were high levels of trust resultant from the openness. It was described as "full-proof trust" by one person. Two respondents said that they had to trust each other because they were there for the students as the number one concern.

In terms of factors that impacted on trust development, two trustees noted that past difficulties between the principal and the Board had made them determined that the current Board worked openly. Another respondent stated that it was their communal vision in wanting the best education they could provide for their children that led them to ensure that they worked well together. Two other trustees said categorically that it was their openness and honesty that created the trust: another that Board training and an understanding of their roles as Board members had helped trust development.

The meeting observation data strongly confirmed that high trust existed on the Board. This was evidenced in: humor; ability to make fun of themselves; lack of tension; high involvement and contribution (all trustees engaged in discussion); shared responsibility offered for tasks; openness over disagreement of ideas and robust levels of challenge and questioning of ideas; considerable affirmation offered when ideas were presented; willingness to shift ideas in light of input from others; and steering of discussion to solution generation. Openness and honesty permeated almost all of the discussion. This was particularly highlighted in comments linked to children climbing a tree in the school. The potential for conflict with the issue was high because it was seen as a tradition in the school to climb this magnificent old tree. However it was also a health and safety issue and although those who supported allowing children to climb the tree shared their wish for it to continue, each one also heard the counter argument and moved their stance for the good of the children.

Length of Time it Took to Establish Mutual Trust

Although one trustee said they could not answer this, three others noted that it took little or no time to establish trust. As one suggested, there was "instant respect for a shared goal of education our children to the best of their abilities." Two trustees stated that it took about three months to establish trust: one other said it took approximately eight months.

Defensiveness Versus Productive Strategies

The results in Table 2 indicate that only one respondent recorded a defensive strategy employed by the Board - that of using persuasion to get what they want (a controlling strategy). Although there were no qualitative comments that elaborated on this response, the meeting observation record shows two instances of one specific trustee using strong persuasion to make a point. There were no other indicators of defensive behaviour apparent in the group interactions and the full survey results recorded in Table 2 show that trustees believed that a highly productive (non-defensive) set of strategies operated. A particular instance illustrating non-defensiveness occurred when one trustee realised they had erred and offered an immediate apology alongside the statement "oh, I was wrong."

Attitude to Development

Responses from all trustees strongly supported that development of both the principal and the Board was a high priority. The principal was seen to be the driving force in Board development (3): "The principal led the way but made sure we understood his direction." One trustee noted the importance of development for such an isolated school:

> As a small school in a rural area we are pro development as we need to make sure our children benefit by keeping up to date with what is happening in the wider NZ schools so they are not disadvantaged.

In 2006, ERO confirmed the positive attitude of the Board to training by noting in its report: "They have participated in training to extend their understanding of roles and have focused on the development and review of school policies and procedures."

In the survey conducted, the principal commitment to development was described by trustees as extremely passionate (4), outstanding (1), encouraging (1), and excellent (1). It was noted that this commitment had a good effect on teachers, the Board and children because he was dedicated to improving teaching and learning. It should be noted also that in the meeting

observed trustees continually referred to their support for helping teachers to develop so that they could do the very best for the children.

Board use of Either Best Practice or Data in Decision-Making

Most members of this Board were clear that both best practice and/or data were used in decision-making, with the principal largely seen to lead this. One trustee noted that once they understood and knew what to do with the use of any data, it was used well. One trustee thought that the Board was "thoroughly competent" at using data. Another said:

> We gather information that is up to date where needed – that is, from other schools or the internet to look at in making our decisions. With the data gathered we talk about it how it relates to us and make it our own.

In 2006, ERO confirmed the good use of data made by the Board when they noted specifically that: good analysis of achievement data was implemented; trustees received clear reports on student achievement; and the principal was accompanying his reports with explanations which were resulting in meaningful discussion with the Board relating to school improvement.

Openness to Change

In this school, change was not seen as threatening. A raft of responses supported this with statements such as: "both teachers and Board are only too willing to try new initiatives"; "accepted widely," "we are used to change, we adapt well," and "change can be good." One comment particularly reiterated a common message from the group about the centrality of the student by stating:

> When we feel we are required or needing to change things that we do we are quite open to discuss it and put new things in place. We do this to benefit our children.

Case Study C

Relationships

All nine trustees in School C reported that exceptionally good relationships existed. Survey comments included varied statements such as excellent, outstanding, awesome, great (2), positive, productive, informative, enjoyable, professional (2), sincere, supportive (2), responsive, unified, a lot of respect for each other (3), all peoples' opinions are respected, thoughtful at all levels, open (5), frank (2), friendly (3), always polite, no one dominating, harmonious, good communication, practical and organised. One trustee summed up the tenor of many comments by stating that there was: "an excellent mix of people, i.e., similar temperaments and open."

One trustee noted that Board and principal relationship was great. The Board were seen to be very supportive of staff and the principal (2). In turn, the principal was seen to do a lot of work for the Board.

All trustees on this Board also suggested that there were high levels of trust and openness in the group, as the following quotes summarise: "Utter trust in principal and staff. Open," and "Feel extremely comfortable to be able to discuss anything at all. Have great trust." Reasons for the high trust were attributed to: robust skills and protocol; people not threatened by expressing their views (3); non-confrontational interactions; a christian/Parish attitude and atmosphere (3);

the fact that it was historical/pre-existing (2); the mix of people; people knowing each other well as parents/professionals (2); people having time enough to smile, talk and chat in the car park; having frequent community events; the professionalism and genuine sincerity of the people involved; guidelines being in place; and having one shared vision of children's education and well-being (3). Of particular note was the contribution of the leadership of the school to the development of trust, as expressed in the following quote:

> There are high levels of competency in the running of the school. If the management are doing a good job its easier for the Board as the negative issues are minimal. Openness and trust are 'fruits' of good practice.

The observation of the Board meeting revealed support for many of the trustee comments. This was an extremely competent and professional Board and trustees were well prepared for the meeting. Chairing of the meeting allowed for an exceptional balance of compassion, warmth, and openness but also ensured that the agenda and business were strongly attended to. Although there were four new members at the meeting, it was difficult to discern who they were – everyone was encouraged to contribute.

Length of Time it Took to Establish Trust

Every trustee believed that it took only a short time to establish trust. Three said that it happened immediately, one that it already existed, and all others that it developed within three to four meetings. The following quote sums this up well:

> With several people, almost immediately. I remember coming away from the first meeting thinking to myself, I like all these people and I think they will all offer very useful skills and perspectives. There was immediate openness. It soon became apparent that everything is laid on the table, there are no hidden agendas and nothing to cover up.

Defensiveness Versus Productive Strategies

Five of the nine trustees explicitly stated that defensiveness was low in this Board. One stated that "where defensiveness may occasionally be a natural reaction, open discussion breaks down any barriers."   Another commented that there was little defensiveness because they were professional if there were issues to deal with.

Table 2 summarizes the responses of trustees to their perceptions of the presence of the elements of defensive or productive strategies. Five defensive items (5, 7, 8, 18, 19) were recorded as being present, however the respondent numbers are low for each item. By far the predominant items recorded were those of productive strategies, with the majority recorded unanimously by trustees. The meeting observation record strongly confirmed the trustee responses. The only exception was the final productive strategy listed (dealing with emotional issues as a joint responsibility) and the absence of that was due to the fact that no emotional issues were apparent in the meeting observed. Of particular note in the observations was the role of the chair in facilitating productive strategies. She was crisp and clear in her leadership, with a balance of efficiency and effectiveness. She allowed openness in discussion for a set period of time without enforcing her own opinion. However, once the dialogue had occurred, she drew the discussion to joint solutions in a masterly way that always directed the conversation in a positive direction. She had no apparent hidden agenda and actively encouraged openness. She requested evidence to support discussion and on every occasion the speaker was able to quickly locate the document of file that contained this evidence. There

were recurring examples that demonstrated that the trustees had prepared exceptionally well for the meeting. The chair engaged all members in active discussion and any contention was dealt with openly by all participants. An example of the latter occurred when the principal reported on the verbal summing up by the ERO team at the conclusion of their visit. One area for improvement was suggested and this was welcomed as an opportunity for growth by trustees rather than anyone arguing against it.

Attitude to Development

The trustees responding to the survey strongly confirmed that they were committed to development (5). The principal in this school was also perceived to be committed to development of both himself and staff (7). He was seen to not only encourage others to go on courses and develop, but he also took up opportunities himself (5), and brought new ideas to the Board. The principal's passion for teaching and learning was noted and links were made to his passion for development to ensure that excellence was a standard. This was reflected in the following comment:

> Total commitment over and above the call of duty at times (it seems). His leadership is inspiring because his passion and commitment towards the school is evident in all that he does including teaching/learning and own learning.

The following three individual comments also reflect the overall Board and principal commitment:

> Very positive, this is a great school since overall it is looking to grow further, (like a growing family), development is a natural consequences.

> Both Board and principal 100% behind development that is in the best interests of the children, school and community.

> Good old mother hen "good better best, never let it rest until the good is better and the better is best!" We are always looking at ways to improve our systems, objectives and vision so that it will ultimately improve outcomes for children.

The principal himself reported that he wanted to see the school being the first choice for parents of Catholic children and wished it to be the best. He noted that he had a great team of teachers and he wanted to lead by example.

The passion and commitment to development that has been reported in the latter statements was apparent at every level of interaction at the observed Board meeting. Reporting back on recent development undertaken by teachers featured strongly in discussion, as did frequent reference to the importance of commitment and excellence in teaching and learning. Throughout the meeting trustees also continuously acknowledged their support for the teaching staff.

Board use of Either Best Practice or Data in Decision-Making

All trustees stated that research and/or effective practice material was used as the basis for decision-making. One respondent recorded that if the Board felt that more information was required then decisions were deferred. The principal was noted as having a strong role in providing best practice information (2) and that he ensured it was up to date (2). Additionally, one trustee stated that other staff also had a leading role in providing the Board with

information and these were seen to be welcomed and acted upon. The responses of trustees are summarised in the following quote:

> We are provided with sound information and advice and I cannot think of one collective decision which I have had second thoughts about.

Openness to Change

Openness to change was evident at the observed meeting, with no evidence of any resistance. Trustees themselves confirmed this with survey comments suggesting the following approaches to change: open discussion and mutual respect facilitating low resistance (2); welcoming of new ideas; no resistance (3); and always looking for better strategies and improvement (2). The principal provided the following comment on the overall attitude to change:

> Because the staff are passionate and motivated they are prepared to accept change. It comes down to confidence that management know what they are doing and 'communication'. Review, develop cycle. We all accept that change is inevitable.

Discussion

Each Board in this study demonstrated low levels of defensive, and high levels of productive, interactions that were in keeping with recent research (Argyris, 2003; Cardno, 2001; Piggot-Irvine, 2005; Piggot-Irvine & Cardno, 2005; Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton & Kleiner, 2000). Trustees operated with honesty (particularly when confronting problems), and openness to new ideas and challenge. 'Advocacy' (explicitness when stating an hypothetical position, yet inviting of evaluation, challenge, and public testing) and 'Inquiry' (encouraging and non-defensively receiving responses and alternative views to test and check one's position) predominated the dialogue that was observed. Shared bilateral (Robinson, 1992) and multilateral (Piggot-Irvine, 2005) control was evident and trust was perceived by trustees to be an outcome of these interactions.

All three schools had a principal and Board that were dedicated to, and passionate about, development of both themselves and staff. Each had a resolute focus on the learning and well-being of children that predominated discussion. The Boards were also characterised by an open and non-resistant attitude to change and engaging with new ideas as well as a commitment to 'informed' decision-making with the principal and Board chairs taking a decisive and guiding leadership role in this. An interesting facet of interaction observed in all schools was also that of humour. The extent of openness was such that trustees felt comfortable to laugh both together and at themselves – they enjoyed their meetings.

It is clear from this study that even in the most difficult circumstances, with commitment Boards can develop the type of open, high trust, relationships that the cases exemplify. Two of the Boards (A and B) had a history of dysfunctional, controlling and avoiding, interactions where the type of high conflict behaviours that Argyris (2003) describes as defensive dominated. The following quote from a trustee in School A identified that in 2005 during a period of low trust:

> The challenge of the Board meetings was to get it finished in under 35 minutes and the input of the trustees was to pick up on any spelling errors in the principal report. There was no mention of student achievement data for at least the last year of this period. There was poor leadership and poor governance.

Respondents in School A referred to the fact that during this period of poor governance trustees lacked honesty and failed to resolve problems because there were less transparent processes. Additionally, power was not shared beyond the principal and the Board chair. This school had three principals and three different Boards over a period of five years and trustees acknowledged that they were exhausted by the problems during that period. The rapid transition from effective governance noted in their 2001 ERO report to requiring high levels of improvement stipulated in their 2005 ERO report, then back to effective noted in their 2007 ERO report illustrates how quickly a school can move from sound governance to weak and back again. Both of the Boards in Schools A and B had overcome defensiveness by showing the courage to confront and resolve their problems. They had challenged what Dick and Dalmau (1999) described as an "adversarial, competitive, and narrowly rational" (p. 47) way of operating.

In contrast to the turbulence evident in Schools A and B, School C had a history of stable, productive interactions. Like Schools A and B, there were palpable features of sharing, openness, and passion for teaching/learning and children, but an outstanding element of the Board interactions in this school was the focus on 'community' linked to strong faith.

In summary, all three success cases demonstrated productive reasoning where advocacy, inquiry, and evidence based discussions predominated. Challenge, receiving others' views and disagreements, and checking perceptions were indicated in the observations conducted with each group and a genuine two-way dialogue, or informed debate, between individuals was evident. These groups constantly enacted the critical consensual and open elements of productive reasoning.

Implications - Learning a Productive Approach to Governance

The interactions that have been described in this paper as productive are in fact a myriad of micro-strategies linked to profound values associated with honesty and integrity. In turn, it is hoped that these strategies and values can lead to enhanced trust. Learning the strategies of productive reasoning requires dedication to overcoming deeply conditioned defensive patterns (a challenging task on its own) and it is not possible to quickly describe how to approach such learning. The final component of this paper, however, provides a very brief introduction for trustees to consider if they are wishing to establish trust and effectiveness.

Cardno et al. (2005), Piggot-Irvine (2005), Robinson (2003), and Senge et al (2000) have all encouraged the adoption of the skills of 'dialogue' as a way to live the values and strategies of productive reasoning. Robinson (1993) cautions however, that an important pre-consideration is to slow down and be patient enough to unravel the existing strategies that are employed with colleagues. This is difficult because most of us are impatient to learn. Cardno et al. (2005) has coined the phrase the 'Triple I' approach to describe the first three steps of dialogue skills. The 'Triple I' refers to:

1. Inform;
2. Illustrate; and
3. Inquire.

The three steps involve disclosing opinion, reasoning and evidence, and then checking whether others see the situation in the same way. Additional steps include working with others to find mutually acceptable solutions, prioritising these solutions, acting upon them, and monitoring outcomes. Each of these steps has layers of complexity and although many believe that just changing their words will be sufficient to develop productive skills, this is not the case.

Becoming candid and open yet holding defensive 'win, don't lose' values is a recipe for distrust and disaster. Learning the dialogue skills requires many practice sessions with specific guidelines for the steps involved and repeated trials in numerous problem situations with a highly skilled facilitator.

Ultimately, becoming productive necessitates the courage to confront problems openly – a characteristic that the Boards in this study have highlighted. Further, it requires that such problem confrontation involves learning of a double-loop type associated with changing underlying values so that problems remain resolved (Piggot-Irvine & Cardno, 2005).

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