

By Charlie Katz

Engaging Business Leaders: How to Improve the Interaction

ENGAGING BUSINESS LEADERS IN YOUR SCHOOL'S PROGRAM IS CRITICAL TO SUSTAINING THE RELATIONSHIPS WHICH CAN PROVIDE A VARIETY OF RESOURCES, BOTH FINANCIAL AND HUMAN, FOR YOUR STUDENTS.

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THE DAYS OF THE ONE-TIME PHOTO OPPORTUNITY DURING WHICH A BUSINESS LEADER PRESENTS AN OVERSIZED CHECK, mugs for the camera with a couple of students, and then leaves the premises so the teachers can get on with teaching—are over. Engaging business leaders in your school's program is critical to sustaining the relationships which can provide a variety of resources, both financial and human, for your students. The old adage rings true: "It takes a village." And the business community is part of the village that can help educate young people and motivate your students to achieve goals they never thought possible.

One of the best ways to engage business leaders: use an advisory board structure. A typical advisory board includes 15-20 business leaders. These local community members are active business leaders, but are also actively interested in the well-being of the community that supports their businesses, including its education system. These business leaders agree to join together for the good of the students. They meet regularly (at least twice a month), form committees, assign roles, set goals and work together to achieve those goals. Depending on the structure of the advisory board, goals may be set largely by learning community members such as counselors, the principal, or others; the business leaders themselves; or by both groups working together. They may involve making sure that the curriculum is rigorous and relevant, that the students are getting

the in-class and extracurricular activities necessary to build a solid resume of technical and employability skills, or that there is sufficient funding beyond the dollars available from the district to achieve the goals. They may set other goals that result in students who successfully aspire to attend college, pursue substantive careers, and become active and productive citizens in the community.

Advisory board members can provide such services as classroom speaking, mentoring, job-shadowing, speaking at student conferences, fundraising, providing technical assistance to and professional development for educators, and advocating on behalf of the school to the district, to the school board, and to other members of the business community. The key with any of these activities is two-fold: first, to set goals and keep the business leaders on track to achieve those goals; and second, to connect the business leaders emotionally with the students.

Business leaders spend most of their days working to achieve goals. Businesspeople are results-driven. They are very used to getting an assignment, determining what needs to be done, and then doing it. In business, the process by which the results are achieved is often secondary to the actual achievement. Bonuses are typically not paid to business leaders for effort...only for results. So giving your advisory board members specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timely goals is the first step to keeping them interested and engaged, and motivating them to engage more in the future.

The second step has to do with con-

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necting them emotionally with your students. Businesspeople may spend much of their work time at an emotional distance from others. While they often work in teams to increase productivity, they may receive little emotional payback. While a businessperson may get a feel-good “attaboy” from the boss, these occasions can be rare. To engage business leaders and sustain their active involvement with your school, you must create an environment that satisfies these kinds of emotional needs. This comes from working with your students: in the classroom, in a mentoring program, during a job-shadowing experience, or during a student conference. You can help fill a businessperson’s “emotional bank account” by having them work with your students, and actually see and feel how their time and/or financial resources help those students succeed. To be sure, these kinds of emotional rewards are but one of a number of benefits businesspeople can receive, but they are definitely among the more powerful and immediate. The

following list shows some of the ways businesspeople can connect with students, and the time commitment generally associated with the activity:

(Time will vary based on personal availability and the interest of employee to engage with students.)

Classroom Participation

One to two times per semester, one hour each time.

- Attend a course to support the curriculum and the teachers’ pedagogy with anecdotes and real-life experiences that bring the curriculum to life.
- With the students, role-play scenarios that simulate the workplace behavior relative to the curriculum being taught; *i.e.*, help the students make the connection between the classroom and the business world.
- Discuss the consequences of poor choices such as dropping out of high school, not getting some postsecondary education, or making poor ethical de-

isions. Include real-life judgments from famous examples such as the Enron case.

- Discuss various professional careers and opportunities, qualifications/college required, earnings potential, travel and promotion.

Field Trips

One to two times during the school year for two to four hours each.

- Bring students to the businessperson’s office location(s) and/or client location(s); observe the way businesspeople behave in an office setting.
- Have students participate in a discussion with a client’s top management regarding ethical behavior in business, how they got into the business and their views of opportunities for the future.
- Visit interesting sites in your community related to business, such as an historic building where a company started, a bank, a brokerage company, a manufacturing company or a service

company. Again, connect the classroom to the business application.

Mentoring

One to two hours per month.

- Mentor one to two students, including meeting with them face-to-face once a month and/or exchanging e-mails more frequently. Suggested discussion topics could include career plans, college choices or homework issues.
- Provide used clothing (or money for new clothing) so students have an outfit for a job or internship interview.
- Help develop students' soft skills: oral and written communication; presentation; resume writing; interviewing; creative thinking; and problem solving.

Job Shadowing

One to two times during the school year for three to four hours each.

- Invite students to travel to business offices to follow or shadow employees in their normal daily routine.

Student Conference

One time during the school year for four to six hours.

- Speak at a daylong (or half day) student conference. You can hold the conference at the businessperson's office or in another meeting area. Topics could include soft skills such as those mentioned above.
- Identify and recruit other speakers to tackle subjects the students need to hear.

Advisory Board Membership

One to two hours per month.

- Join the local academy advisory board and commit to attending meetings to help steer student success
- Serve as officer, or as a committee chair (fundraising, internships, activities, recruitment, public relations).



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- Provide or find expertise and annual services pro bono should the advisory board wish to go 501(c)3.

Paid Internships

Six to 10 weeks after the end of students' junior year (daily supervision/management required).

- Provide paid internship positions for students to give high school seniors a real sense of what the world of work is all about.
- Provide funding for a paid internship position with a nonprofit organization that is closer to the school, or more convenient for the student.

Advocate

- Be a spokesperson for the school to the principal, district superintendent, school board, and the community at large (chamber of commerce,

Kiwanis, Rotary).

- Encourage more participation from businesspeople in the community.

By setting goals for businesspeople and giving them the room to run—and by connecting them emotionally with the people whom they are investing in—you can motivate, stimulate and energize your business community to fully engage with your school, and be active participants in building today's youth into tomorrow's productive citizens and workforce. **I**

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