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Schools sit on powder keg, and superintendent has a match

What would happen to a corporate CEO who wouldn't answer directors' questions, gagged them in meetings, made them pay to see the files, battled them in court on the company's dime, skipped their budget workshop, cut back the firm's key product without telling them and then hid a huge deficit?

You know well what would happen, and that's what school board member Renier Diaz de la Portilla wants to happen to Miami-Dade Schools Superintendent Rudy Crew for that same menu of actions, and more. He's looking into the legality of voiding Dr. Crew's contract for cause.

The fuse is burning on this political powder keg. Unfortunately, it was Dr. Crew himself, not board members, who struck the match.

Nothing is guaranteed to set off elected officials like arrogance on the part of someone they appoint. A hired hand who sneers at the bosses as has Dr. Crew is in for a hot time, even if — perhaps especially if — he's very good at some parts of his job.

It's unfortunate that it should come to this. As an educational theoretician, Dr. Crew is tops. He has a national reputation. It's hard to disagree with his key concepts. His aims for children are admirable.

But theory is one thing. Getting everyone on the same page is something far different. And trying to keep a school board on your lesson plan by ignoring or intimidating dissenters works only so long as you can keep the board divided and the dissenters in the distinct minority.

It might not work here much longer.

As the board and Dr. Crew struggle to balance the upcoming budget by July 1, as law requires, Dr. Crew has been fanning the flames very near that powder keg.

It began when he ignored requests for information from one board member, saying the administrative staff was too busy. We don't know how many that staff number — I've been asking for two weeks myself how many people work in school headquarters and was told they don't keep records on that — but there are certainly enough people to answer the bosses' questions.

That's the crux of the problem: Dr. Crew doesn't recognize who's boss. Yet he was appointed by the school board, which is the equivalent of a corporate CEO reporting to the corporate board. And that board, in turn, reports to a higher authority — in corporations it's the shareholders, in the school it's the taxpayers who elected them. Any CEO who fails to recognize that pecking order does so at his peril.

What else did he do to alienate his bosses?

First, he told a dissenting board member to pay for copies of school records.

Next, he had the schools pay his own attorney \$450 an hour to help him keep the board member out of the records.

Then he wouldn't let dissenters put discussion items on their own agenda. He muscled the board's majority into agreeing with him on that.

All of that is prologue to what has happened in the past two weeks, a period of intensified pressure as the board and Dr. Crew argue over how to trim a budget that stood at \$2.981 billion as of May down to \$2.769 billion for the year beginning July 1.

Cutting into one of society's most vital functions, the education of our children, is dicey in even the most civilized of boardrooms. Here, it's been disastrous, and Dr. Crew has made it far worse than it needed to be.

First, his foremost board critic, Marta Perez, called a board workshop to discuss ways to make the budget cuts less painful, a reasonable course in difficult times. But Dr. Crew skipped Dr. Perez's meeting. So did every single member of his cabinet. Too busy worrying about the budget cuts to talk about how to make them, his spokesperson said.

The same day, board members found out that Dr. Crew had cut 800 teaching jobs within the prior two weeks without their

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approval or even telling them what he was doing. The board's vice chairwoman fumed that the board had earlier voted not to do exactly what Dr. Crew then did.

Then last week board members learned that Dr. Crew had run a deficit for the current year and never told them about it. He said he'd wanted to wait to tell them until he'd made "a deeper analysis of what the projections of this have been over the long haul" — though the year of deficits was less than two weeks from its conclusion.

He still hasn't told the board how big this year's secret deficit is.

School finances are especially difficult these days. Education in the nation's fourth-largest district always is problematic. And dealing with 57,028 employees — the June 11 body count — is no picnic, either. Dr. Crew has a tough job indeed.

But he has turned the difficult into the impossible. His sin is not lack of insight into education but lack of insight into how to deal with his bosses — who ultimately are all of us.

Even the most talented corporate CEO who loses the board's confidence goes out the door. And Dr. Crew, who has two more years on his contract, becomes less and less likely to complete them.

It's harder and harder to snuff out that burning fuse — especially after two weeks of the superintendent pouring high-test gasoline around the powder keg.