

Tough Love for Board Members

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It may seem like a minor issue, but difficult board members could cause big trouble for nonprofits of all sizes.

The scenarios are all too common:

- A director doesn't show up for meetings or arrives unprepared, leaving her colleagues to carry the load—and in some cases questions the decisions they make.
- Another dominates debate, shooting down questions until getting his way.
- One plays devil's advocate to an extreme, questioning every decision and fighting the majority rule.
- Yet another insists on revisiting issues that already have been resolved, wasting valuable time.

Any one of these difficult directors on a single board might be easy to overlook, to write off, to wait out. But local experts say inaction could result in an inefficient, ineffective board—not exactly what we're shooting for when we volunteer to help an organization carry out its mission.

So what's a beleaguered board chair to do?

First, consider the nature of the problem director. Is it someone who is having trouble getting engaged in board activities or someone who is having trouble taking a necessary step back?

Inactivity is much more common than over-involvement, said board consultant Ruth Purcell-Jones, president of Indianapolis-based Trustee Leadership Development.

"The biggest problem is when organizations can't get board members to come to meetings—a lack of attendance, lack of commitment," she said. "That's one I hear over and over and over again."

The root of such problems often lies in the relationship between the organization and the board, Purcell-Jones said. Board members want to feel like they're contributing to the organization's progress, not just watching from the sidelines.

“A disengaged board is usually one where the agenda is report, report, report,” she said. “It’s all the board being talked to, and nothing coming back from them—except maybe some fund raising. There’s no brainpower, no creativity, no real heart connecting with the mission. ... You have to engage their minds, their hearts, their passions. Like anything else, if it’s no fun, you’re not going to do it.”

In such situations, board leaders should work with the organization’s staff to come up with a game plan. Boards are essentially teams, Purcell-Jones said, and want to help the organization score by focusing on things like setting its vision and bolstering its resources—and not just the financial ones.

“I prefer to think that everyone who serves on a board wants to contribute,” she said.

Still, attendance and non-participation can be an issue even on high-functioning boards. In that case, it’s important for board members know what’s expected of them.

Orientation for new members is a good first step, the experts said, and some organizations even ask directors to sign written agreements spelling out various requirements—and the results for not meeting them. Attendance standards are increasingly common, with members who don’t pass muster losing their board seats. Conflict-of-interest policies also are a good idea, so it’s clear to directors up-front that board service isn’t about quid pro quo.

“So many board members anymore don’t know how to be board members,” said Jessica White, owner of Indianapolis-based consulting firm Jessica White Associates.

Blame corporate relocations and downsizing decisions that have left central Indiana with fewer high-level executives used to board service—and more middle managers with less time to learn, she said. Training programs are available, but even that is too much of a commitment for some busy directors.

Aiming to correct that course, White sometimes sits in on board meetings and offers coaching as issues arise, delivering instruction in small doses “so they don’t feel overwhelmed,” she said.

Still, White has firsthand knowledge of the other kind of problem director, too—like the board chair who recently took her to task when an assessment White’s firm conducted didn’t turn out as expected, even though the board had signed off on the process at a previous meeting.

“She had, in her mind, a very different study, despite how we had described it and what the board had approved,” White said. “And she was very intimidating. No one wanted to speak up when she got in her mood ... It’s sad when one person can have that much influence.”

Over-involved board members may be less common than inactive ones, but they can pose problems nonetheless. An overbearing personality—one who dominates debates or pushes a personal agenda, for example—can create an uncomfortable meeting environment. And in extreme circumstances, that could cause other board members to lose interest.

Same goes for the more benign but still troublesome directors who insist on dredging up old issues, going off on tangents or reminiscing about the “good old days” of the past.

That’s why it’s important for board chairs to have an agenda and stick to it—all the better to keep members on task. If someone brings up an issue that isn’t up for discussion, put it in the “parking lot” and revisit it as a future agenda item.

A strong governance committee can help a board evaluate its performance and identify problems, experts said. Some boards also impose term limits, making sure that difficult board members won’t be around forever if leaders aren’t comfortable with confrontation.

Term limits also encourage fresh faces—and thinking—on boards, said Thomas Hutchinson, a partner at Indianapolis law firm Krieg Devault and chairman of its nonprofit practice group.

Indeed, the process of recruiting and selecting new directors is critical, the experts said. The relatively short-supply of committed members makes it a challenge, but boards still should be picky about who they get and what they ask for.

“So many organizations are just so eager to fill slots they don’t set expectations,” White said. “But it’s much easier to find good people upfront than to deal with problems later.”