

Bullies in the Boardroom

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Joining a board should be an honor. It is an opportunity to use leadership skills and tact to advance a shared mission. The boardroom environment should be a place of respect among peers.

Yet some associations deal with the “boardroom bully.”

There is no phenomenon more damaging, disruptive and counter-productive to associations than that of a director who takes on the role of bully. It is disruptive and hurtful. Directors or staff may resign stating, “This is not why I got involved in this association.”

Despite the best efforts to educate boards about good governance and to anticipate problems, bullying can cause damage to the organization as well as the volunteer leaders and professional staff.

Association boards are difficult to manage under the best of circumstances. To advance the important work that they do it is imperative to understand what causes bullies and how best to deal with them. The behavior may appear suddenly, quickly causing harm to the board culture and desired outcomes.

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Though rogue behavior seems to appear out of nowhere, there are some specific causes, and pro-active steps can be taken to ward off the damaging effects. The causes are often as complicated as the human psyche, but, essentially, they can be condensed into the following:

Self-Interests - Putting one’s needs or desires above that of the organization. Although most directors have an understanding that their power is jointly shared with the other members of the team and that a board only speaks through appropriate channels, some directors allow their personal desires, jealousies, and agendas to dictate their behavior. Oftentimes, it is only one or two board members who are behaving badly, but unfortunately, they are often able to bully other directors into submission or convince them that they are acting in the best interest of the board.

Role Clarity - Blurring of lines between governance and management. Either out of some need to micromanage the organization or a lack of knowledge about the differing roles of board and staff, board members begin to interfere in the day-to-day

management of the association. Micromanagement might include personally directing the executive director or staff, making decisions outside of the board, and holding improper meetings with select board members. This behavior undermines and interferes with the work of board, committees and staff.

Accountability - Failure to police their own bad behaviors. Because board members either lack the self-confidence or the expertise to reign in wayward colleagues, executive directors are often left to try to counter the board behavior, further putting themselves and the association at risk. Board members must understand their role as trustees and act as a unit. When board members act outside of that role, fellow board members must be responsible for addressing the problem and for supporting the executive director.

Bullying Solutions

To achieve good governance, a respectful environment, and role clarity, it is important for board members to adopt processes to decrease the likelihood of rogue board behaviors.

The following steps should be considered:

- Emphasize the qualifications and characteristics of good board members and put measures in place to assure that the most highly qualified of candidates be selected.
- Provide orientation at the beginning of the term as well as at intervals throughout their tenure. Board members should be taught the principles of good board behavior, the difference between governance and management, the distinct responsibilities of board and staff, and the importance of treating each other with respect.
- Emphasize to board members, particularly the board chair, the necessity for boards to police themselves, and for the board to intervene in cases of rogue behavior.
- Expect that the governing documents of the association be followed and that fiduciary roles are understood and observed.
- Emphasize that the executive director works for the board and is answerable to the board itself, not to individual board members, and the importance of supporting the executive director against rogue board behavior.

No board is perfect and no executive director is immune to the vagaries of board behavior. The effectiveness of associations depends upon the highest level of trusteeship from directors who understand their roles and are willing to take a stand against behaviors that threaten their efforts.

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