

Guest Column Chris Blake, CT Bar

(May be used entirely or as consecutive columns) (860) 612-2014

Dysfunctional Boards - Symptoms and Cures

Part I – Identifying Dysfunctional Board Traits

Part II – The Cure for Dysfunctional Board Traits

Identifying Dysfunctional Board Traits (Part I)

By Christopher G. Blake and Robert C. Harris, CAE

As bar executives, we have been blessed to work with boards and committees that function smoothly and act in the best interests of the organization with a clear sense of purpose and vision. However, there are rare instances when a board or committee acts dysfunctional. The results of a dysfunctional board are often gridlock, frustration or lack of progress in achieving critical goals for the association.

A dysfunctional board can set an organization back through indecision, inaction or inertia. Identifying the symptoms of dysfunction can help bar executives and boards alike to alleviate these problems — creating a more productive climate to achieve the association's objectives. The most common symptoms of dysfunction include the following:

Inability to Set or Focus on Goals

Simply put, if you don't know where you are going, you probably won't get there. A board without goals will not be nearly as productive. A board that cannot stay focused on its goals will not achieve them. Equally disconcerting is a board with too many goals, overwhelming the organization's resources.

Unable to Make Decisions

Some boards set excellent goals, but when faced with a difficult issue, they freeze or cannot make a decision. This manifests itself in a "task force" mentality. Task forces and committees are useful when a difficult issue needs further study or requires the involvement of those outside the organization to come up with the best solution. However, a board that routinely assigns issues to committees is deferring action, which often causes problems to fester and results in missed opportunities for the organization. Along the same lines, beware of the board member who too quickly delays any action by making a motion to "table the issue."

Destructive Criticism

Every board has a critic, a member who sits back and lobbs bombs at new ideas and proposals. The critic can be identified with statements like: "We tried that years ago and it didn't work," or "That will never fly with [fill in your favorite name or entity]." The critic cannot bring down an entire board alone, but he or she can wreak havoc if allowed to set the board's agenda, interface with volunteers and direct staff.

Personality Clashes and Infighting

Sometimes, a board has members who simply cannot agree on anything. Whether these members have a personality clash or sharp philosophical or ideological differences, they just cannot get along. This can present serious problems, especially when a board is struggling with sensitive or complicated issues that require teamwork, compromise and consensus.

Difficult Leaders

There's a scene in the movie, "The Blues Brothers," in which actors Dan Aykroyd and John Belushi rob a convenience store and help themselves to a tankful of gas for their car. As a woman looks on, aghast at the two men, Aykroyd brushes past her and says, "Ma'am, we're on a mission from God."

Boards may encounter presidents or committee chairs that believe they have a calling that is inconsistent with the mission of the organization. Volunteers with personal agendas and far reaching missions are hard to dissuade them from their quest, even if they are contrary to the goals of the board or the association.

Lack of Teamwork - Too Many Agendas

It's as true in board management as it is in sports – teamwork is essential to success. When board members are pulling in different directions, the results are a tug of war and wasted energy. When everybody is pulling in the same direction, that creates forward movement. Lack of teamwork can result in poor orientation, competing agendas among board members, and misunderstanding of member needs. Boards function more effectively when working with one agenda (the association's) and one set of goals or a strategic plan.

Show Horses vs. Work Horses

A statehouse reporter once observed, "There are two kinds of legislators – show horses and work horses." The show horse is the person who loves to get in front of the camera and crow about all of the great things he or she is doing for the public. The work horse is the individual who quietly volunteers for committee work, can be relied upon to do what he or she sets out to do and seldom seeks the limelight. Follow-through is a wonderful asset of board members.

Micro-Management and Paralysis by Analysis

The classic board-staff model has clearly defined roles: the board sets policy and the staff carries out the policy and administers the affairs of the organization. Unfortunately, you may run across a board member who has a secret desire to be an association administrator. This board member is the type who loves to spend an hour arguing over a \$100 line item in a \$5 million budget. The flip side of micro-managing is paralysis by analysis: an obsession with analyzing every issue to the point where nothing gets done.

The goal of the association board and bar staff is to identify any dysfunction traits into board strengths. This article can be very helpful in an orientation manual for new volunteers or in the nomination's package for identifying new leaders.

###

Note: Chris Blake is Director of Communications at the Connecticut Bar Association in New Britain (cblake@ctbar.org). Bob Harris teaches association management at Tallahassee Community College in Florida. (bob@rchcae.com)

Dysfunctional Boards - Symptoms and Cures

Part I – Identifying Dysfunctional Board Traits

Part II – The Cure for Dysfunctional Board Traits

The Cure for Dysfunctional Board Traits (Part II)

By Christopher G. Blake and Robert C. Harris, CAE

Having identified the traits of a board that prove to make it dysfunctional, the good news is that there steps an association can take to ensure that its board functions with harmony and purpose. Consider how you can use these tips to help your board be more effective.

Set Annual Goals

Once the board establishes goals, it is important for the leader to get all board members to buy in to the plan. Use an experienced facilitator who can moderate a candid discussion about opportunities and goals for the association. It is helpful to incorporate one or several team building exercises at this board retreat.

Schedule Time to Review Goals; Update Action Plans

It's easy to lose sight of an organization's goals once the crush of business becomes heavy. Staff recognizes it as "putting out fires" or crisis management. That's why it's important to incorporate time at regular board meetings (or schedule periodic special meetings) to monitor progress on the board's goals and, if necessary, revise the goals or marshal resources to achieve them.

Rely on Committees

Boards deal with a variety of complex issues. At times, they can spend time spinning their wheels when an issue arises that has not been thoroughly researched and boiled down to a couple of reasonable solutions. The alternative is to establish a structure of standing and ad hoc committees, work groups and virtual committees to study the issues. Not every board member has to be an expert on every single issue. A strong committee structure is a good way to give board members meaningful roles, while at the same time developing expertise and a sound basis for decision-making.

Utilize Social Functions

It is much harder to yell and scream at someone at the board table when that person is a friend with whom you have shared friendly conversation in a social setting. A board dinner or social event is an ideal way for board members to get to know each other better and develop a mutual respect and camaraderie.

Recognize Achievements

Board members do not volunteer to get recognition, but it is nice when your peers acknowledge your work and thank you for it.

Use Parliamentary Procedures

Parliamentary procedures ensure that all voices and viewpoints are heard, with the ultimate goal that the will of the majority shall prevail. Parliamentary procedures promote order and respect in a deliberative body. Take time to train board members how to utilize parliamentary procedures properly and understand the significance of full and open debate.

Disarm the Board Critic

The best way to satisfy (or silence) a board critic is to charge that person with finding solutions, rather than permitting them to constantly complain. The second-best way to deal with the board critic is to disarm the critic with facts. If the board critic, for example, wants to "give away the store," develop a report that will show that in order to convert self-supporting member benefits into free benefits, the association will have to increase dues by X-amount of dollars. Then ask the board, "Do we want to increase dues to provide these services or products for free?" The answer will probably be a resounding, "No!" Be cautious of adding critics to long-term committees — they can make everyone's life miserable!

Continual Communications

Effective communication with the board and between board and staff minimizes the chances for ambiguity, misunderstanding and misinterpretation. Encourage two-way communications that involve all the board and staff. Use technology (e-mails, Listserv, bulletin boards) to communicate between board meetings.

Boards are powerful forces resulting in good work and positive change for bar associations. When they are working in harmony, they can achieve great things and move bar associations forward. It is our hope that this article will assist boards and bar executives in harnessing the full potential of boards.

#

Note: Chris Blake is Director of Communications at the Connecticut Bar Association in New Britain (cblake@ctbar.org). Bob Harris teaches association management at Tallahassee Community College in Florida. (bob@rchcae.com)