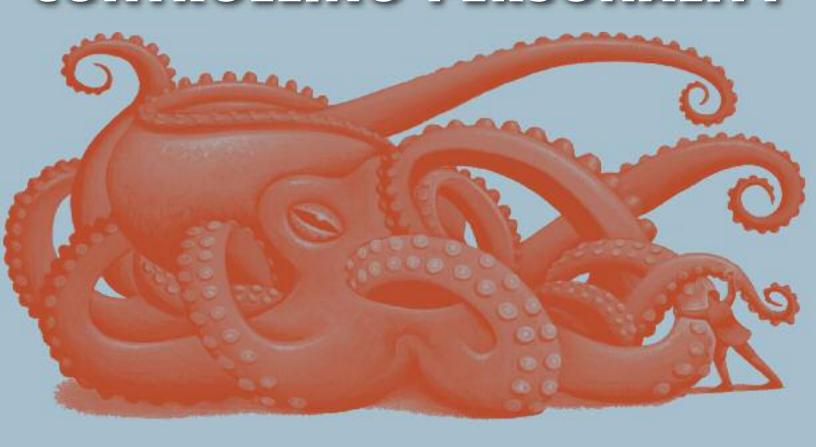


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Taming the *Troublesome*Board Member

by Katha Kissman

BULLIES OR DISPLAYS A CONTROLLING PERSONALITY





INTRODUCTION

Chief executives, board chairs, and consultants constantly seek solutions to the multitude of challenges a nonprofit board may face at any juncture. The short- or long-term effects of an individual board member's troublesome actions or behaviors can be one of the greatest detriments to this leadership team. These effects can be both direct — confusion, loss of energy or focus, difficulty in making decisions — and indirect — weakened morale, loss of productivity and service quality, and in extreme cases, high board or staff turnover and a damaged public reputation.

The first step in finding a successful resolution to difficulties with an individual is recognizing that a person's actions or behaviors usually stem from something specific, whether it is ignorance, misunderstanding, a personality conflict, or a deeper issue. This is predicated on the assumption that a second step will occur — that leadership will intervene directly, humanely, with unity, and in a timely way. If leadership doesn't guide the process, the trouble could be left unattended and may result in disaster. The final step, finding a winning solution, will require unique approaches for different groups and various answers for differing circumstances. In some cases it may involve looking at board structure to effect a minor change in board process or a major culture shift of the entire board. In other cases it will necessitate "holding up the mirror" to help the individual take a step back and understand the effects of his or her behavior within the context of the board's work and providing suggestions for change. And yes, the ultimate solution might also mean a change in board membership — asking a board member to give up his or her seat on the board.

Easier said than done, right? Why? Because boards are made up of people. No one enjoys conflict or confrontation, especially with regard to a professional colleague. Successfully working in a group context is highly dynamic and can engender great passion and emotion when disagreements or conflicts erupt. Paying attention to these dynamics and actively honoring the human element requires commitment and work.

UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM

Troublesome behaviors are tricky. No two situations are alike and each case can have layers of complexity that contribute to the overall negative effect. What may start out as short-term troubling behaviors can become chronic troublesome behaviors if not recognized or if actively ignored. Addressing troubling behavior in a timely manner can make the difference between troubling and troublesome. And, understanding the root of troublesome behaviors is critical to finding the best way to change or overcome the situation. Some of these behaviors can be managed to save the person's seat on the board. Some can be managed, but it may not be the best course of action. Some simply cannot, and should not, be managed, and action to remove a board member should be taken as quickly as possible.

The following behavior is a result of damaged board teamwork. When board members are motivated by their own individual opinions rather than working to form a group stance on a particular issue or decision, it shows disrespect for the group's diversity of knowledge, opinion, and motivation, and prevents teamwork from happening efficiently or at all. Some or all of the following measures could be taken to prevent the behaviors from forming:



- All potential board members should be fully vetted in the recruitment process, particularly when they are recommended over and over again from the same source. To vet properly:
 - Ask questions to get a sense of whether or not an individual works well in a group.
 - o Look for individuals who can keep an open mind and see different sides to an issue.
 - Keep an eye out for signs of a strong ego (has he or she been able to serve in a nonleadership role on another board successfully?) and make a few discreet inquiries if need be.
- A discussion on team theory and how decisions are reached and honored should take place during the orientation and onboarding process. All board members should know the consequences of failing to work together as a team.
- Meeting etiquette should be discussed during recruitment and orientation, as well as the consequences of not adhering to it.
- Maintain an overall board understanding of the expectations and limitations of board-staff relationships.
- Create job descriptions for the board as a whole, individual board members, board officers, and committees so there is no misunderstanding regarding specific roles and responsibilities.
- Time should be spent annually on team-building and leadership development exercises to ensure an understanding and commitment to group work.

TROUBLESOME BEHAVIOR: BULLIES OR DISPLAYS A CONTROLLING PERSONALITY

Definition: When a board member, especially one who is not in a position of authority, has an obsessive and inappropriate need or desire to control other people or situations and acts in a domineering, intimidating, or threatening manner in order to get his or her way.

Impact: This behavior causes ill will and compromised relationships on the board and possibly even with the staff, leading to a breakdown of trust and an inability to work together. It stifles the opinions and input of others, alienating fellow board members from what should be a group process. The others are discouraged by a feeling of working for someone rather than the important cause that brought them there in the first place. A board member with a controlling personality causes the board to miss out on the knowledge and insight of other board members, making passive stewards out of once-engaged board members.

Case: Dale Denton came on the board at the suggestion of the chief executive. Dale had a background in the area of research that the organization served and everyone felt that this would give him great insight into the organization's products and services and strategic framework.

During his first two years of service, he was relatively quiet. He came to meetings and made significant financial contributions and when he did speak up, what he had to say was very helpful. When the organization moved forward with a major new initiative, Dale became more and more active and more vocal.



Bryce Boynton was the staff person in charge of the organization's research department. Dale worked on the board committee that provided editorial support to that department. It was an important committee because the organization had to represent to its members and subscribers that their information was timely and correct.

Each year, Bryce would prepare the annual work plan and process to solicit article contributors and research project reports for the annual publication. Last year, Dale was concerned that Bryce's methodology didn't reach out to enough potential contributors. He had sent Bryce a number of e-mails with additional suggestions on whom to call and where to advertise and even how to do a public service announcement.

It was time to issue the requests for proposals for the coming year. Dale decided to talk to Phyllis Potter, the chief executive, to let her know that he didn't think Bryce was reaching out enough or to the right individuals. Phyllis talked to Bryce, and he explained why he was doing it this way. It was actually an issue of available resources (staff hours and funding) and competing work priorities more than any disagreement with Dale's suggestions. Phyllis reported back to Dale, saying she felt that while it may not be the ideal way to do it, she was confident that Bryce was getting the job done in the best way possible considering stretched resources.

Dale wrote a scathing e-mail to Phyllis and Bryce and copied the entire board. He detailed the numerous ideas that he had offered and even went so far as to say that if it were a problem of hands to work and money to fund, he would volunteer the hours and even subsidize some of the advertising. He concluded with comments that were just shy of calling Phyllis and Bryce inept and incompetent.

Jake Jenson, the board's chair, had no sooner opened the e-mail than he was on the phone to Dale. He told Dale that his e-mail and the tone in which he presented his information were extremely disconcerting. He pointed out that the e-mail, copied to the entire board, can have a long-term and very damaging effect on the board's relationship with the staff. Jake said he knew that Dale did not intend for the e-mail to be perceived in this way and that he was afraid that Dale's offer to make the organization stronger would only get lost because of the way it was addressed.

Dale was silent.

Jake: "I know this may be hard for you to hear, but do me a favor and give this some thought. I'll call you back in an hour."

An hour later, Jake called Dale back. Dale had taken time to think about what Jake said, and saw his point. He recognized that his zeal was intended to help, but his action was hurtful, and he said he would write another e-mail and apologize.

Dale did send an apology, as promised. But there were lingering effects of what he had done. Trust had been broken, and it took time to rebuild.

WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN DONE?

Regardless of whether or not Dale was doing the right thing by getting so involved in the hands-on work and communicating directly with Bryce, he should have respected the chief executive's response to his initial concern. Sometimes board members simply don't have all the information about the real life, day-to-day juggling going on inside the organization as the paid staff struggles to get everything done with limited time and resources. In order to keep a strong and constructive partnership with the chief executive, members of the board need to trust and respect the executive's judgment in managing the organization.



SOLUTION STRATEGY: Now WHAT?

Again, the staff members need to be the ones to fit all the pieces together because they are the ones who have all the pieces. The board chair handled this extremely well. He addressed the behavior, not the person or the issue (i.e., the content of the e-mail). He did it in a direct way, and he gave Dale a chance to think. He also did not back down from following up, and, had Dale not offered a solution to fix the problem, the board chair would have been the one to force the next step.

If the board chair had not immediately intervened, the damage to trust and relationships within the organization may not have been repaired quite as easily, if ever. When boards ignore or procrastinate in dealing with behaviors like this because of fear or apathy, they actually enable such behavior and allow it to worsen.

TIPS FOR GIVING AND RECEIVING FEEDBACK

Most often, the first step in managing a troublesome board member is to initiate a conversation. By meeting with the board member, the board chair and/or responsible committee can clarify perceptions, develop options for resolution, solicit the board member's understanding and agreement to a course of action, and plan for follow-up afterward to ensure a successful resolution for all.

Giving and receiving feedback takes conscious effort and can be most successful if those involved understand that some simple ground rules will make all the difference in the world.

WHEN GIVING FEEDBACK:

- Ask if you can give feedback and if it's the right time. Honor the answer.
- State your intention as to why you wish to give feedback.
- Ask if the person has any questions or responses, and then listen.
- Set up a future time to continue the discussion if necessary.
- Respect the person for hearing you out.
- Thank the person for listening.

How do you say something that should be obvious without letting the board member think he or she is being insulted?

- Be descriptive rather than evaluative. By repeating what you understood the other person to say without evaluating the content, the speaker is reassured that he or she is being listened to and understood.
- Be specific. By citing examples of specific behavior, the individual will better understand how he or she acted inappropriately and how to avoid the situation in the future.
- Focus on the feelings of the person who has experienced the behavior and is offering the feedback. By using the "I" language rather than making accusations about the other person, the person giving feedback prevents automatic, defensive responses and increases the likelihood that his or her point will be considered. It is difficult to challenge a statement about how someone feels.



- Direct the conversation at elements of the behavior the receiver can do something about. Only feedback that has the potential to solicit a change in behavior is constructive.
- Time it well. Feedback can be ineffective if tempers are too high or the current situation has degenerated beyond salvage. Time your feedback so that it is given when it is least threatening.
- Check to ensure clear communication. Ending feedback with a summation of the conversation ensures that you have made your point clearly and that the individual understands how his or her behavior affects the group.
- Avoid "dumping" or "unloading" on the other person. Feedback is not a venting process; it is designed to help the individual make positive changes in his or her behavior. Feedback used to "get something off your chest" is rarely effective and may alienate the recipient.
- Don't ask "Why?" It is not effective to ask people why they act in a certain way often, they won't know. It is better to focus on the future and how the behavior can be improved.

WHEN RECEIVING FEEDBACK:

- Be sure you are in the right frame of mind to hear what's being offered. If not, set another time that would be better.
- Listen (active listening) and breathe deeply to keep yourself calm and focused.
- Respect the other person for offering the feedback.
- Ask clarifying questions to increase your understanding of what is being offered.
- Resist the impulse to defend at this time. Take time to think about what you've heard.
- Don't disagree there may be an ounce of truth that you must consider before responding.
- Schedule a time to reconvene and finish the discussion.
- Thank the person for giving the feedback.

Ultimately, of course, learning from the conversation and deriving preventative strategies can reduce the risk of similar situations in the future.

Please note: Issues stemming from board dynamics often require professional guidance to resolve. If you would like to improve your board's effectiveness, please consider contacting BoardSource's consultants for assistance via email (consulting@boardsource.org) or by calling 800-883-6262.

This e-Excerpt is from the book Taming the Troublesome Board Member by Katha Kissman. © 2006 BoardSource. Click here to learn more about this book.



SUGGESTED RESOURCES

Board Self-Assessment

Culture of Inquiry: Healthy Debate in the Boardroom

Governance as Leadership: Reframing the Work of Nonprofit Boards

Getting the Best from Your Board: An Executive's Guide to a Successful Partnership

Managing Conflicts of Interest: A Primer for Nonprofit Boards, Second Edition

Meeting, and Exceeding Expectations: A Guide to Successful Nonprofit Board Meetings, Second Edition

Moving Beyond Founder's Syndrome to Nonprofit Success

Taming the Troublesome Board Member

Ten Basic Responsibilities of Nonprofit Boards, Second Edition

The Board Building Cycle: Nine Steps to Finding, Recruiting, and Engaging Nonprofit Board Members, Second Edition

The Board Chair Handbook, Second Edition

The Handbook of Nonprofit Governance

The Nonprofit Board Answer Book: A Practical Guide for Board Members and Chief Executives, Second Edition

The Nonprofit Policy Sampler, Second Edition

The Source: Twelve Principles of Governance That Power Exceptional Boards

