

Dealing with Difficult Board Members – Part 1

Most experienced not-for-profit Board members will tell you that one of the most rewarding aspects of their position is the opportunity it gives them to work alongside some fantastic colleagues.

But what happens when you come across a Board member who is not pulling his or her weight? What if one member is throwing around too much weight, dominating discussions or intimidating other members? What about the person who seems to want to "white ant" all of the Board's decisions? Or the one who means well but just doesn't seem to grasp his or her responsibilities?

Hopefully, you will never come across any such people but human nature being what it is, chances are you probably will.

This help sheet is designed to try to offer some strategies for dealing with difficult Board members. One word of warning, however. Just because you personally do not get along with a particular member does not mean they are necessarily "difficult". Personality clashes should not be used as an excuse to sideline a colleague.

CASE STUDY 1: The Dominator

The Symptoms: One person dominates debates and discussions, often talking over other Board members or shouting to make their view heard above all others. Other Board members regularly submit to the view of the Dominator in order to keep the peace, neglecting their duty to contribute fully to the workings and decisions of the Board.

Short-Term Treatment:

- If you have a good relationship with the Board member, arrange to meet him/her informally to talk about the problem. If you are not comfortable doing this, ask the Board Chair to speak to them – after all, it is the Chair's job to ensure meetings are conducted smoothly and that all members are given a chance to contribute.
- Speak with your Board colleagues about the possibility of placing time limits on individual contributions to debates or discussions during meetings. This can be easily achieved with a stop-watch controlled by the Chair.

CASE STUDY 2: The Bludger

The Symptoms: The Bludger may be present and even active during Board meetings but does little work in between. He or she does not read the agenda before meetings, does not review the minutes and does not carry out tasks assigned to him or her, or regularly completes tasks late.

Short-Term Treatment:

- Make sure that all Board members are aware of their roles and responsibilities. Hold a special meeting or retreat to renegotiate them. Ask all members to sign a statement confirming they understand what is expected of them.
- Try to find out reasons the Board member is not pulling his or her weight, particularly if this appears to be a new problem. It may be that personal or work commitments are encroaching on their time more than usual, or that they have lost interest or faith in the Board's mission. If the member is struggling for time, ask if they would like work to be reassigned to another member. If they have lost interest or faith in the Board, ask them to offer solutions to fix the problem.

CASE STUDY 3: The Absentee

The Symptoms: The Absentee does not often attend Board meetings. In fact, he or she does not take part in many Board events at all. Colleagues are resentful of the apparent lack of commitment and are beginning to wonder why the Absentee is even acknowledged as a member.

Short-Term Treatment:

- The most important function of a Board member is to attend meetings; after all, it is here that important decisions are made and directions are decided. Ensure all Board members are aware of their responsibility to attend most, if not all, meetings. Make sure this is spelled out during the induction period.
- Try to find out what is preventing the member from attending regularly. If the meetings are too boring, or usually run over time, or are held at inconvenient times or locations, more long-term strategies may need to be put in place to fix the problem.
- Check if your rules require a certain minimum level of attendance. If they do, point this out to the absentee member. If they don't, consider putting such a rule in place.

CASE STUDY 4: The Non-Contributor

The Symptoms: The Non-Contributor is a silent fixture of most meetings. He or she rarely if ever contributes to discussions or debates and never volunteers for between-meeting tasks.

Short-Term Treatment:

- The Chair can encourage a greater contribution by asking the member for their opinion during meetings and discussions. If the Non-Contributor is merely shy or uncomfortable about voicing his or her opinion, a direct approach might help to bring them out of their shell. Similarly, Non-Contributors might be more than happy to take on Board tasks but could be unwilling to push themselves forward – asking them directly if they will do this or that might encourage a greater contribution.
- Ensure all members are aware of their legal duty to contribute to Board decisions, and point out that just turning up is not enough to fulfill this duty.

CASE STUDY 5: The Empire Builder

The Symptoms: These Board members appear less interested in the organisation they are governing than how they can use their position to further their own personal or business ends. They

lobby to get their "mates" and supporters onto the Board and there are real concerns about potential or real conflicts of interest.

Short-Term Treatment:

- Ensure all members are aware of their primary duty to the group they are governing, that they are familiar with the Board's ethics and conflict of interest policies and that all personal or business interests are lodged on the Board's "Interest Register".
- Ensure you have a rigorous Board member selection and recruitment process in place so that all potential Board members are given equal treatment and selected on their merits, rather than "who they know".

CASE STUDY 6: The White-Anter

The Symptoms: Sometimes it seems like this Board member is working against the community group rather than for it. Every debate is turned into a "me versus them" contest and the member will not support majority decisions of the Board s/he has not voted for. The White-Anter regularly disrupts meetings with tantrums and walk-outs and bad-mouths the Board to outside influences including the media.

Short-Term Treatment:

- Ensure that all Board members are getting a fair hearing during debates and that all decision-making procedures are followed to the letter. Don't give the White-Anter an opportunity to accuse the Board of unfair or improper decision-making.
- Make sure all Board members are aware of their duty to operate as a team. If necessary, undertake some "Team-Building" exercises, such as informal functions or retreats.
- While dissenting views are normal and healthy, working against majority decisions is not. The Board may need to consider some long-term strategies that could include having this Board member removed.

CASE STUDY 7: The Bore

The Symptoms: Everyone is familiar with the work of the Bore. S/he drones on and on during meetings, speaking at length about irrelevant issues and restating points people have already heard and understood. Despite the tiresome monologues, the Bore is often a nice person and colleagues are usually unwilling to offend them by directly confronting the problem.

Short-Term Treatment:

- Consider the possibility of placing time limits on individual contributions to debates or discussions during meetings. This can be easily achieved with a stop-watch controlled by the Chair. Because all members will be subject to the same rule, this offers a tactful way of minimising the pain caused by the Bore's interminable speeches.

CASE STUDY 8: The Dinosaur

The Symptoms: This person has served on the Board for what seems like forever. While the other Board members respect his/her commitment to the organisation and the historical knowledge s/he brings to the role, some are worried that his/her presence is contributing to a "staleness" within the Board.

Short-Term Treatment:

- A regular turnover and injection of new ideas can be good for a Board's long-term prospects. Initiate a discussion about the possibility of putting in place term limits, stipulating that Board members can only serve for certain number of consecutive years or terms. This will ensure a regular turnover of members.
- A good mix of youth and experience never goes astray on a community group Board. Think carefully about whether you really want to push out someone who has such a strong commitment to your group.