

MANAGING CONFLICT AMONG BOARD MEMBERS

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Ideally, a board of directors should be composed of individuals who work cohesively and efficiently to manage the community they serve. But in reality this is not always the case. Boards are comprised of different people with different abilities, talents, opinions, and life stories, trying to make decisions on behalf of an entire community in a manner that most benefits that community and its residents. Given this reality, the truth is that conflict among board members occurs far more often than we'd like to see.

The problem is not the conflict itself, but how the conflict is handled and resolved. Oftentimes, small disputes are not quickly resolved and escalate to extreme conflicts during which board members forget their ethical obligations and back-stab each other to undermine board decisions with which they do not agree.

What many directors fail to recognize, however, is that this type of conflict is detrimental to the welfare of the community and its residents by reducing the trust level members have in their boards. As a result, every action taken by such board becomes suspect and subject to owner scrutiny. Although directors may think they are acting in the best interests of the community by trying to “push” their position through, what they fail to realize is that unresolved and escalated board conflict will hurt a community far more than any one decision of a board. For this reason it is imperative that directors learn to handle conflicts at the board level before such conflicts get out of hand and become detrimental to the community.

Different people handle conflicts differently. For example, some people are “barkers” that throw temper tantrums and fling insults at others until they get what they want. Others are “wet blankets” that find reasons to reject every proposal or idea. And some people do nothing but complain. Each type of individual requires a different strategy for effective conflict resolution.

To better illustrate different types of conflict styles and resolution methods, below are sample conflict styles and resolution tools:

Barkers and Biters: I'm never going to agree with this proposal. You are all stupid and wrong, and we are not leaving this meeting until you see it my way and change your mind.

Barkers and Biters throw temper tantrums to get their way, trample on other people's opinions, or make cutting and often personal remarks. The difference between them is that Barkers are insensitive, and Biters can be destructive.

- Stay calm. Breathe. Be very aware of your body language and choice of words.
- Listen carefully. Ask yourself "what is going on here" and not "what can I do".
- Hold your ground with Barkers and Biters.
- Wait out their outbursts and then say something like, "I can see this upsets you. However, let's try to talk about this calmly."
- Confront Biters with questions like, "That comment doesn't help the situation. Let's try something else."

Constant Complainers: I don't like the idea and it won't work. They never work. Nothing in this makes any sense. I don't know why we would even try it.

When you hear a sentence beginning, "You never . . ." or "You always . . ." get ready for the Constant Complainer. Constant Complainers gripe so much that it is hard to recognize—much less sympathize—when they have a legitimate concern.

- Ask questions that are solution-oriented, like, "What are some possible solutions to this?"
- I've heard the concerns, now tell me the possibilities for success, etc.

Silent Sufferers: Silence. More silence. Passive body language, but no verbal clues.

Silent sufferers never complain (although they may sigh a lot). Underneath that silence, they feel put upon, but you often have to play a guessing game about what is wrong. If you ask them about something, they are likely to answer with minimal responses like "yes" or "no."

- Ask lots of open-ended questions that can't be answered "yes" or "no" and wait them out when they try to turn you off with silence.
- Pay very close attention to body language and word choice.

Silent Steamers: Silence. More silence. Defensive or angry body language, but no verbal clues.

Silent Steamers look like silent sufferers, but their silence hides a lot of pent-up anger waiting to explode.

- Ask open-ended questions and wait their silence during confrontations.
- Pay close attention to body language.

Wet Blankets: I guess we can change things, but it won't work. But whatever you want.

Mention any change to Wet Blankets and they will have a hundred reasons why it can't or shouldn't be done.

- Introduce changes slowly.
- Tell them what you have in mind.
- Let them criticize it.
- Ask them how they would solve the problem.
- Tell them you are seeking their opinion and cooperation.

Know-It-Alls: Here's what we are going to do and it is the only way that it works. From my experience, my idea is the right idea – and here's why.

The know-it-alls may often have the most experience or knowledge on an issue. This knowledge can give them power, which allows them to run over those who have other ideas.

- Talk to them about respecting others' ideas and opinions—in private, of course.
- Remind them that with their knowledge comes responsibility.
- Don't let them become Barkers or Biters.

The Great Pretender: Yes, I know the solution but I'm not prepared to discuss it now.

Great Pretenders pose as know-it-alls.

- Recognize that they are insecure and overly sensitive. When it's necessary to call their bluff, leave them an out so they can save face.
- Give true specific objectives, goals and tasks.
- When they make recommendations that won't work, begin your redirect sentence with, "Or, we could try....."

Wafflers: I don't know what to think. I can see this side, but I can also see the other side. What do you guys think? Or, I need to sit and think on this.

Wafflers can't make decisions—or don't want to make decisions because they are afraid they will make the wrong ones. They become distracted by a desire to please. If you ask them how they feel about something, they'll often ask counter questions to determine how you want them to feel about it.

- Try to break the issues down into individual parts.
- Give them deadlines.
- Reward making decisions and not the decision itself.

Although there will always be some board conflicts that cannot be resolved, utilizing the above methods will help significantly lower the number of unresolved conflicts.

Should you have any questions concerning conflict resolution, please do not hesitate to contact one of our attorneys at 303.432.9999.