



# The Leadership Letter

## Board Conflict: How to Know When It's Becoming Ugly

There's a very old and well-repeated phrase about advocacy work with legislators:

**Don't burn your bridges! The next time, they might vote with you.**

The saying is equally applicable to association Boards of Directors and clearly identifies the strategy that should be incorporated into any disagreements within a Board. Those disagreements may be minor or major, but Board members need to remember that everyone at the table wants the best for the association...they just have a different perspective on how to get there.

Sometimes, however, those disagreements get ugly and poison the collaborative working relationship that should exist among the Board members. At times, it even goes as far as to cause Board resignations. People escape the conflict by simply tuning out and refusing to participate.

### What Are Some of the Symptoms That Conflict is About to Negatively Impact Your Board?

- ◆ **Accusations get personal** or people are arguing without listening to each other.
- ◆ The **discussion moves outside the meeting.** People congregate on the parking lot to rehash

the discussion and express what they really think.

- ◆ The **media** gets in the act...Board members are quoted as disagreeing with the policies and decisions made by the Board.
- ◆ **Resignations** become the norm and members don't show up for meetings.
- ◆ **Pressure** is brought to bear on members to take a certain position.
- ◆ **Social media, e-mail** and other forms of communication continue the conflict, often with personal attacks on individual Board members.
- ◆ The **gossip tree** starts, with communications going among and beyond the members of the Board.
- ◆ **Board members are confronted by individuals** outside of the meeting about positions they have taken.

Resolving this Board dysfunction is often as painful as starting it in the first place. Conflict is difficult for most people, and this type of conflict only weakens an organization. In this newsletter, we'll explore how to prevent this type of situation by putting in place policies & procedures that permit conflict while maintaining "an agreement to disagree."

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# What Triggers Conflict?

People who serve on volunteer boards are generally committed to the organization's mission and programs. They care deeply about issues and can have very divergent ideas about how to address those issues.

## Board Members Disagree About an Issue They Care About Deeply

- ◇ Members have differences of opinion about mission and key agency activities.
- ◇ Members have differing opinions and loyalties in regard to the competence of the Business Manager/Executive Director.
- ◇ Members bring differences in generational experience, perspective and understanding...we've done it THIS way for 20 years!
- ◇ Members have varied opinions about how to react to major negative situations...for instance, declining revenues and deficit budgets.

## The Board Lacks the Management Tools Needed to Manage Disagreement

- ◇ The Board chair doesn't know how to manage through conflict.
- ◇ Board members prefer to avoid disagreements by making decisions outside of the "official" meeting. This can be a particular pitfall for the Board's Executive Committee.

## People Behave in Provocative, Unproductive Ways

- ◇ Members talk over other

members.

- ◇ A member dominates a discussion.
- ◇ Challenges are put forth to every statement made by certain individuals.
- ◇ Members are attacked personally, sometimes with abusive language.
- ◇ Members exhibit dismissive body language (such as eye-rolling).

## Structures Promote Factions

- ◇ Board structures that contain certain "slots" for particular organizations are particularly prone to conflict. Guarding the interests of the group they represent can often derail the best interests of the organization they represent as a Board.
- ◇ Members who are recruited as "friends" or "supporters" of a particular Board member or the Executive Director can find themselves in conflict if forced to support one side over the other.

## Association Committees Don't Operate Within the Policies and Protocols of the Association

- ◇ Committees that perceive themselves to have more power than is actually the case can promote conflict if the Board chooses to ignore their recommendations or go in another direction.
- ◇ An Executive Committee that makes decisions outside of the Board meeting and then anticipates that the proposals will be

"rubber stamped" can generate significant conflict, particularly if the Committee has chosen to move forward and is simply informing the Board of its actions. Most Executive Committees are empowered to act only in the event of an emergency that requires immediate action.

- ◇ Nominating committees that only recruit candidates who reflect their personal perspectives and biases both generate conflict and weaken the association.
- ◇ Finance committees that see themselves as the "be all-end all" of the Board process don't contribute to the collaborative process.
- ◇ Strategic planning committees have a "vision" and fail to share it with stakeholders and Board members as they move through a planning process. The process fails to incorporate significant stakeholder input and the plan that is produced reflects only the "vision" of the members of the committee.

Because of the pitfalls that wait if appropriate management doesn't occur, it's critical that the policies and procedures of the Association be well-defined, maintained and utilized. Begin to manage conflict by reviewing your Board operating procedures and policies.

*Some material for this article excerpted from Board Conflict, Governance Matters, [www.governancematters.org](http://www.governancematters.org), retrieved 4/18/2013*

# How to Manage Conflict

There's nothing more unproductive and frustrating than sitting in a Board meeting listening to arguments and conflicts among your colleagues. *If this is the normal operating procedure of your Board, why would anyone agree to serve in that capacity?*

There are some basics to managing conflict, and we'll attempt to outline those for you; *however, in the end, it comes down to the interpersonal and management skills of the Board leadership to ensure that meetings are productive and civil.*

## Test Your Own Understanding of What is Happening

- Do you really have conflict or just dissent? Is the discussion productive or negative?
- Are the issues that are surfacing legitimate questions or do these issues simply reflect personal relationships and perspectives?
- Are the differences being aired in a respectful manner or is the discussion dissolving into the "ugly" that we mentioned on page 1?

## Determine the Nature of the Conflict

- Who are the primary players?
- Is this conflict based on personal agendas or on significant differences of opinion?

## When There Really Are Differences of Opinion

There are multiple strategies that can be used to help manage the process. ***Real differences of opinion should be valued and***

***respected.*** A variety of opinions enriches the discussion and makes the solution to a problem that much more significant when groups can be brought to consensus.

## Some options to try:

- **Identify a mediator**—This should be someone who interacts well with all parties, is considered neutral, and has the vision to identify and clarify the issues that are inherent in the discussion. This can be someone from the Board or it can be someone from outside of the Board who comes in with no pre-conceived notions or opinions. This person should have good group process skills, and, if the Board President has the requisite skills, then he/she can act as mediator. If not, then someone else should fill the role. The Executive Director/Business Manager should not serve in this capacity and should remain neutral to preserve the relationship that exists between the Board and executive.
- **Build commitment to resolve the conflict**—It is important to acknowledge what is happening and to avoid pulling the conflict outside of the Board meeting. Sometimes, just having your perspective acknowledged will let an individual move forward to a resolution. Board leaders should strive to work with the individuals involved to get their commitment to find a solution to the problem.

- **Clearly define the issue**—Often, conflict arises because everyone's not on the same page. If everyone understands the issue in the same light, you are much more likely to come to consensus.
- **Hold each other accountable to behave in a professional and civil manner during discussions**—The Board should have established policies that set guidelines for interactions during meetings. If these guidelines are created thoughtfully and carefully, conflict should be minimized; however, if someone chooses not to abide by the guidelines, the Board should make it clear that this type of behavior is unacceptable.

**Finally, it comes down to different ideas, perspectives and philosophies, and Board members must learn to function within the parameters set by the organization.** If you find yourself in significant conflict with a Board decision or policy, there are two things you can do:

- 1) Work within the organizational confines to move the policy/decision in the direction that you deem to be the most profitable for the organization.
- 2) Choose to relinquish your position on the Board and allow someone to serve who is more in sync with the mission and operations of the organization.

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***Did You Know?***

***SECA has a series of nine Board orientation/ training modules.*** The modules include a background paper, a PowerPoint presentation (and questions) for Board training, and information about resources. Modules 4 and 5A provide more background on topics in this newsletter.

*Module 4: Association Personnel: The Executive Director*

*Module 5A: The Board of Directors: Structure, Activities*

**You might also want to access previous issues of  
*The Leadership Letter***

⇒ *January 2013—Role of the President*

⇒ *November 2012—Ethical Conduct*

⇒ *May 2012—Strategic Planning*

⇒ *March 2012—Challenging Board Personalities*

**All materials can be downloaded from the website at  
<http://www.southernearlychildhood.org/leadership.php>.**

**Click on Leadership Resources.**

*The Leadership Letter* is written and produced bi-monthly by Glenda Bean, Executive Director of SECA, under the auspices of the SECA Leadership Commission. Interested persons may sign up for free access to the newsletter at [www.southernearlychildhood.org](http://www.southernearlychildhood.org).

## Let's Remain Friends!

You joined the Board because you were committed to the organization and its mission and, after a few meetings, you're not so sure that you made a wise choice.

You thought you understood what the Board was all about, but you've found out that's it not exactly what you had envisioned. You've found some colleagues on the Board who don't seem to fit your idea of a supportive Board member, and you're afraid that you're going to lose those friends whom you value that participate in Board activities with you.

***Disagreements should occur frequently within a Board meeting....***as a Board member, you shouldn't just **"go along to get along."** You are voting to expend organizational resources and set

agendas that will be the "public face" of both the Board and the organization, and this should be a thoughtful and, sometimes, challenging process.

That doesn't mean that those disagreements should be taken outside of the Board meeting. Differences of opinion are fine and we're sure that most of you have them from time to time with your "significant other". **No two people are in agreement all the time...it's how you resolve those disagreements that makes the difference.**

Disagreements should be aired politely and courteously and should never devolve into personal recriminations or attacks. Just because someone disagrees with you doesn't make that person a "bad

person"...it just means they have a different perspective.

If disagreement didn't have value, we wouldn't have a democratic society....our system is based upon the give and take inherent in disagreements and differing perspectives. Although you may not feel that it's working very well right now, we've seen bi-partisanship (inherent stresses in differing philosophies) work well. Just think about the creation of Social Security, Head Start and many of the other programs that are so much a part of our lives. Those weren't "love fests" to come to a consensus!

Just remember what your Mama told you, **"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."** You'll be fine!