

How To Avoid Firing a Board Member

by Carol E. Weisman

He controls the purse strings of a large corporation.

He rarely shows up at meetings,
When he does, he is obnoxious and disruptive.

She hasn't been to a meeting in over year

He hasn't joined your organization.

Paying dues is a prerequisite of board membership

Running a nonprofit is like owning a car. With regular maintenance and service, the chance for major problems are reduced but not eliminated. Adherence to a clear maintenance schedule, also known as a board letter of commitment and by-laws, can address 90% of board problems.

First of all, there needs to be a clear, written set of expectations written by the nominating committee and ratified by the board. Two copies should be sent to the nominee and should he or she accept, a signed copy should sent to the office and one kept by the board member. This helps avoid the "moi?! syndrome." This is when people are asked to do something and they utter a surprised "moi?!"

Such a letter would read something like this:

We are pleased you are joining our board. The meetings are on the second Tuesday of the month from 7:00 am until 8:30 am at the Smith Bank Building on Elm. As part of board membership you agree to:

1. Attend at least 60% of all meetings.
2. Make an annual contribution no less than \$100.00.
3. Serve on at least one committee.
4. Support the annual dinner dance by selling or buying 10 tickets.

What happens when the agreement is not upheld? Who should contact the "problem" board member? Volunteer leadership should always do these things. Just as the executive director is responsible for managing staff problems within the organization, the board president and executive committee is responsible for the management problems within the board. When two meetings in a row have been missed, the board president needs to be on the phone.

Should there be a major problem with attending meetings in the future? There can be four alternatives: a leave from the board for a designated period of time, a change in status to an advisory capacity, a decision to work on a single project or committee, or resignation.

A board leave or sabbatical can be taken when a problem arises in the professional or personal life of a board member which appears to be time limited. Such a leave policy needs to be outlined in the by-laws. For instance, if terms are for three years, I recommend no more than one six-month leave in a term.

For others, they may want to stay connected, but not in as intense a fashion. This is why I advocate advisory boards. I call them "board purgatory," a middle ground between leaving and staying active. Advisory board members can be people who have served on the board and are finishing their active role, people who cannot attend meetings on a regular basis or choose not to meet other full board requirements. A slot on an advisory committee can also smooth the transition when the volunteer is no longer wanted in a position of power. The talents they brought to the table can be utilized and the problems neutralized.

Some board members have seasonal commitments, which make full board service difficult. They may spend prolonged periods of time out of the city or have intense business commitments. These people may want to consider working on a committee or project, which is scheduled during an anticipated hiatus in their schedules. Someone in retailing may want to chair a spring project, while an accountant is certainly not going to take on a March through April assignment.

Resignation should be seen as a last alternative for attendance problems.

In addition to clear expectations, clear term limits should not only be defined in the by-laws, they should be observed. At the end of a term, board service should be evaluated and a decision made by the nominating committee as to whether another term should be offered. This is also the time to discuss a written agreement of service with long time board members who are no longer active. It is not uncommon for a board member, perhaps after five or six years, to simply want to move on to pursue other interests.

There are other problems that may indicate the need to fire a board members.

These are the kind which one loses sleep over, because they involve personality issues. It takes a great deal of work, thought and effort to find a win-win position.

One agency lost \$27,000 on a dinner dance because of the ineptitude of the chair. Rather than lynch her, she was thanked for trying so hard. Every single thing she did right was outlined (it took a lot of thought to come up with anything) and she was told her talents would be better utilized in an advisory capacity. Why not just show her the door? Several reasons: One was her eight-figure bank balance. Another was her husband's business ties. But most importantly, it was an example to others that making major mistakes would not be dealt with in a harsh, punitive manner. A sense of caring and developing leadership was expressed. Kindness always pays both in financial and spiritual wealth.

Sometimes the solution to problems is relatively easy. For instance, the committee chair that wants to spend two hours on a single issue should always be last on the agenda and should be asked to submit a report in writing.

The first rule of firing a volunteer is praise in public, discuss problems in private and go the extra mile to have a volunteer leave as a friend whenever possible.

Whenever possible, it is important to do whatever needs to be done to have the volunteer leave as a friend. Although difficult, a major effort has to be made. A letter of thanks, a public acknowledgment or a word in the newsletter can soothe hurt feelings. If you are right and they are wrong, so what? It costs nothing to have the broader shoulders. It can cost your agency plenty in public relations and funding when a major player leaves ruffled. And even minor members have powerful pals. One board president left with no thank you or goodbye after problems with the executive director. When called about a \$150,000 grant opportunity, he sent them elsewhere.

Clear expectations, a letter of agreement when joining a board, options to board service such as sabbaticals, a shift to advisory board service or just committee membership, can keep your non profit in running order. And finally, kindness counts. When people are treated with respect and dignity, the entire agency is more productive. It is a better place for clients, staff and ultimately your mission will be advanced.

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