

When Good Boards Go Bad

How can well-meaning boards get so terribly off track? And how can you lead them back in the right direction?

By Janet E. Rechtman

As community collaborations, nonprofit boards depend on the goodwill and cooperation of a number of people. The true miracle of our business is how often this teamwork actually succeeds. Perhaps that is why we are so thunderstruck when a board starts to go sour.

The problems often begin when personalities take precedence over issues.

Suddenly, meetings have become contentious and unpleasant. A toxic board is lashing out at staff members who already feel like they are devoting all their energies to meeting client needs. Before long, everyone is wondering how such a well-meaning organization got so horribly off track.

But even a board that has already started on the path to ruin can turn back in the right direction. If you detect the early warning signals — personalities overshadowing issues and boards turning on staff — the time to act is now. Consider these steps:

- ♦ **Work behind the scenes with the major contributors to the board dysfunction.** Ask a trusted colleague to share concerns with these individuals and see whether there is a genuine problem that needs attention. If so, help the individuals frame their concerns appropriately for board consideration. You may also want to consider mediation or another formal intervention if there is a particular problem that can't be resolved easily.

- ♦ **Check in with the mission.** Update the board on its goals and reenergize its focus. If you are part of a national federation, consider bringing in a speaker from the organization's headquarters. If you are local, invite an expert on your issue to a workshop with the board and staff. Organize a hands-on volunteer service experience or tour your facilities. This can bring the focus back to the people you serve and the work you do. Afterward, hold an open discussion about what the mission means to the community and to the board.
- ♦ **Openly raise the question of board effectiveness.** It might be in a meeting or at a retreat. Share your observations and ask if others have concerns. If they've spotted similar problems, consider dedicating resources to help the board improve its working relationships. For example, you may want to ask the immediate past chair to conduct confidential interviews with board members to identify specific challenges and gather suggestions for improvement. Another idea is to dedicate your board retreat to questions of board development, like roles, responsibilities, board mission, and mutual expectations regarding working relationships, communication, and accountability.
- ♦ **Clarify the skill needs, commitments, values, and behavioral norms for the board.** Share these with all board members and encourage them to hold each other accountable. Identify knowledge gaps and recruit new board members to fill them.
- ♦ **Both board members and staff need a forum to address openly internal challenges.** Make sure the board leaders and the chief executive work with senior staff to create a space for their grievances. It's far better to address the problems outright than to hope they go away or pretend they don't exist. If the board is having problems, you can be sure that the staff is talking about it. Combine respectful and realistic acknowledgment of the board development process with a continued appreciation of the staff's contributions. Rebuilding a board that has gone sour requires time and, above all, teamwork. Remember, nonprofit boards are community collaborations; they embody the goodwill and cooperation of a number of people. Fortunately, for a good cause, goodwill and cooperation are renewable resources. ✧

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Resources:

The Troublesome Board Member by Mark Baile. BoardSource, 1996.

Keeping the Peace: Resolving Conflict in the Boardroom by Marion Peters Angelica. BoardSource, 2000.

Building a Successful Team: A Video Guide to Nonprofit Board Development. Hosted by Fred Grandy. BoardSource, 2001.

