

ASSOCIATION BRIDGE, LLC

Leading community associations over deep waters

Wild One

By Thomas L. Willis, PCAM®

IS IT DISSONANCE or dissidence? In the beginning, it can be hard to tell. When healthy dialogue turns to personal insults, innuendo, gossip, and disruptive arguments, board meetings can get off message and contentious. Left unabated, the board fractures, no one is satisfied and the community suffers. How can a board deal with a disagreeable board member? Each situation is unique, so specific approaches will differ. However, there are a few helpful tactics boards and managers can use.

Embrace discord. Don't dismiss discord. Listen to alternate opinions and engage those who feel disenfranchised. For example, when a candidate runs for the board on an overly negative platform, communicate actively and try to get at the root of the homeowner's dissatisfaction. Address discord as soon as it arises, and never assume you know the motivations of another person. Ask questions, even when you don't think you'll like the answer. There may be opportunities to build bridges.

Take the high road. Always strive to do the right thing-remembering that you serve for the benefit of all members. Be principle-based, not ego-based, especially when others are not. When necessary, remind others that policies, decisions, and actions should be in harmony with the goals and vision of the community. Don't allow yourself to be drawn into personal arguments or put on the defensive. I once knew a board member who taped his own off-the-wall notices on locked bulletin boards around the property. That board took the high road, and wisely chose not to engage in a tit-for-tat information battle; instead they sent accurate information to residents through official channels and removed the personal rants as soon as they were posted.

Be positive and principled. It's difficult to disagree with someone who is consistently positive. Give others the benefit of the doubt, and assume that all are working for the good of the community. At the same time, don't debate with those who engage in argument for sport. It's also difficult to disagree with principles after endorsing them. Focus on the principles on which all board members agree and work toward them.

Establish procedures. Leaders cannot allow distractions to prevent the essential business of the association from being conducted at meetings. Using *Robert's Rules of Order* during meetings allows the board chair to manage time and discussion. For example, I once had a board member who, when he didn't get his way, got up, sat on the other side of the table, and harangued the board "as a concerned owner." The chair simply declared him out of order after apologizing for having to do so.

Focus on results. Motivational speaker Zig Ziglar says never let anyone come to you with a problem without also having two possible solutions. Requiring two solutions makes complainers think through the process and allows them to be part of the solution. Another benefit of this approach is that it helps identify those who are only interested in sounding the alarm.

Separate the messenger from the message. Dissident opinions may have value or contain nuggets of truth. Even if a person communicates in the wrong way, it doesn't mean the message is wrong. Look at alternative policies or procedures and plot out the "what-if's." This allows the board to visualize what the future would be if the idea was adopted. Allow the process to point out whether that future would be better.

Stay humble. Nothing dampens community spirit or discourages volunteers like an ugly public confrontation-even when you're right. And when you aren't, be willing to admit you're wrong. Be gracious in victory. Ultimately it's about the members, not the leaders. It's about principle, not personality.

Don't get defensive. It's human nature to be defensive when attacked, or to lash out when others are disagreeable. When we view someone as an enemy, they always wear a black hat and we always wear the white one. These reactions might provide temporary personal satisfaction, but they won't help a bad situation. This isn't an old Western movie in which the bad guy always wears a black hat-it's the reality of human interaction.

Be patient. Rogue board members often play to the court of public opinion, but that court frequently finds them guilty. That board member who hopped over to the other side of the table as a "concerned owner" was resoundingly defeated at the next annual meeting. He was later elected to a master association position, only to wind up in the news for being disruptive at council meetings, and was defeated in the next election.

Get tough-if you must. Regrettably, even after applying the highest principles, listening to a vocal minority and providing every opportunity for positive engagement, some board members may still be unreasonable. As a last resort-when inappropriate behavior is so severe or chronic that extreme actions prove necessary-board chairs may have to adjourn a meeting or ask the member to leave. The board may even have to vote a member off the board rather than allow the community to suffer. For example, in one recent case, deep chasms in a community led to two different boards arguing over which one was duly constituted. Court actions and six-figure legal fees caused the essential business of the association to be largely ignored. Everybody lost, and the unit owners will be paying the price for years to come.

Applying these principles allows leaders to find the best in themselves and others. Boards that stay focused on the bigger picture, stand squarely on principle, and remain positive take the wind out of the sails of a rogue board member. Believe that the end of a thing can be better than its beginning. As the late industrialist Henry J. Kaiser once said, "Problems are only opportunities in work clothes."

Reprinted by permission from the July/ August 2007 edition of *Common Ground*, a CAI publication