

## **Why Conflict Matters: Unanimous decisions by your board could be masking bigger issues.**

(Note: underlined items will have their own article)

You've just finished another board meeting and it couldn't have gone better. Everything went exactly according to the agenda and all votes were approved unanimously, with very little debate or drama. Time to celebrate!

But maybe that smooth board meeting is symptomatic of larger lingering issues. While much of your board business is likely straightforward (i.e. approval of minutes) and should not cause much debate, frequent unanimous votes with little or no debate could be a sign of one or two problems: a disengaged board and/or a lack of diverse opinions among board members.

Board engagement – Board members, for the most part, are volunteers. That means they don't get paid to do your work! Most have "real jobs" and other interests to tend to such as their kid's soccer practice. With all the advances in communications and technology, no one seems to have any free time available. Many people, given the choice, would rather give their money than their time, because time, once spent, is gone forever. So when you have someone commit to serving on your board, thank them. It means they have carved out a slice of their time for your organization's mission. So what if you feel a board member is disengaged? Here are a few practices that have worked for us:

- 1) Organize and prepare board packets and send them out in advance of the meeting – a least a week prior if possible. If you have committee reports, send a written report in advance and have the committee chair give a brief update during the board meeting. This does two things: keeps the board from having to do committee work and allows for multiple people to talk at your board meeting, breaking the ice and setting the tone for more participation.
- 2) If you are finding one or more board members becoming disengaged and uninterested in a topic being discussed, talk with them at a break or following the meeting. It may be that they really didn't have a strong opinion on the issue, or maybe they are just having a bad day. Either way, your conversation will let them know that you noticed something wrong and may prompt them to be more attentive going forward. This obviously requires a little trust and respect for the person so as not to seem accusatory.
- 3) Another idea is to directly ask a disengaged board member for their feedback. "Bob, we haven't heard from you yet, what do you think about the proposed dues change?" Also, when proposing a new idea or program, offer multiple solutions and allow the board to debate and select the best course of action.
- 4) Add time on each agenda for strategic discussions. You've assembled the industry leaders in a room to discuss what? The minutes from the last meeting? These are the leaders in your field – put them to work tackling your toughest challenges. Should we expand our geographic region? Should we offer new services to appeal to younger members? What about new markets?



If none of these tactics work, you may have to admit that you just have a dud for a board member and discuss the matter with your chair.

Diversity – What is the make-up of your general membership? Is it an equal mix of men and women? Companies from different markets or states? Various ages or races? Regardless of the characteristics of your membership, your board should be representative of that diversity. The board speaks and acts “on behalf of the membership” so they should therefore be representative of the membership.

It sounds pretty obvious, but in practice it just doesn’t happen all the time for many reasons. Maybe you have a younger demographic but none of the younger members seem to be stepping up and nominating themselves for board seats. Here are a few ideas to ensure better diversity:

- 1) Know your membership make-up – how can you know if your board is representative of the membership if you don’t know the membership? So get the facts first.
- 2) Review your board nomination process – do you require members to serve on a committee first? How long are the board terms? What is the average duration of a board member? It may not be appealing to a younger professional to serve a year on a committee, followed by two to four years on the board before being considered for an officer position, only to realize they have to move up that ladder over the course of the next three or four years. What you are saying is that if you play your cards right young lady, in ten years you may be the chair of this organization!
- 3) Create some interest groups or councils – this is a great way to get more involvement and preview who is likely to emerge as a future leader of your organization. Maybe it’s a young leaders’ council or sales professional group. Again, know your industry and the natural segments within and create opportunities.

This may be shocking, but young people may have different ideas than older members and men and women don’t always agree on issues!

So is it possible to take this whole “conflict is good” thing too far? You bet it is! If your board meetings have turned into free-for-all arguments where nothing is getting accomplished, you can always count on these tried and true solutions:

- 1) Stick to the agenda- when stream of consciousness conversations lead you down a path you did not intend, gently nudge the board back in line by saying something like “We seem to have strayed a bit from the agenda. I think we were talking about item C. Can we get back to that”? In most cases, that should be sufficient.
- 2) Stick to Robert’s Rules (or any other board meeting procedures you have adopted). Robert’s Rules allows for debate to occur, but in an orderly and manageable manner. Only one person should have



the floor as nothing is more frustrating than having two or three conversations occurring at the same time. The board chair should be well versed with Robert's Rules and run the meeting, but if he is not, make a cheat sheet for him.

- 3) Remember the Mission – This can be your greatest tool to reel in conversations. Ask “how will this debate or decision advance our mission”? And if your board doesn't know your mission, put it at the top of the agenda! If it doesn't advance your mission, quit wasting your leaderships' time with it.

### Summary

Is your board lacking diversity, and thus you are only hearing one side of the debate? Is your board disengaged and you are not even hearing a debate? As association executives, we must be continually aware of the dynamics of our board and their make-up. Utilizing these ten best practices when appropriate can help ensure you have a more functional and productive board.

Motion to adjourn? Motion approved – unanimously!

