

The Weak Board Member

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INTRODUCTION

The members of a corporate board had been wrestling with an issue for some time. Arguments for and against had been made and sometimes the discussion had become heated. Although the process was difficult, board members were giving the issue thorough consideration and the ultimate decision would be made with appropriate thoroughness and rigor. However one board member chose to participate infrequently, and when he did speak, it usually took the discussion off topic, much to the frustration of the others in the group.

Many boards find themselves in such a situation with a board member who contributes little or not at all or who may pull the board off topic, slowing down or even interfering with the board's progress. It may be unclear why the individual is sitting on the board and the stronger members may begin to feel frustrated and resentful. The board has become stuck.

This common situation typically gets ignored and the individual becomes marginalized. A board that allows valuable board seats to be filled by such individuals fails to fulfill its responsibilities.

Addressing the issue of the weak board member is tricky and many boards choose to ignore the situation as much as they can. Yet with respectful and courageous leadership, the weak board member can be brought up to speed or carefully removed from the board.



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COMMON WEAK BEHAVIORS

Common weak behaviors fall into three categories. Behaviors that are the result of thinking styles make up the Cognitive category. The Social category contains behaviors that are seen in interpersonal interactions. Other behaviors that are based on an individual's personality make up the Personality category.

Examples of Cognitive Behaviors include:

- A board member may participate in a discussion but contribute in superficial ways. They may only echo what has already been said, not as a way to reach consensus but to just say something.
- Boards usually have a member or two who are inflexible in their thinking and believe that they have all the answers.
- Other individuals may be overly focused on their own experiences and offer the same ideas and solutions without fully examining the current situation.
- Some board members want to solve every problem or focus on unimportant issues.
- Other board members may move too quickly to issues that should be handled by the management rather than the board.

Examples of Social Behaviors include:

- A board member may be overly abrasive. They can dominate by shutting down the discussion with harsh language or overbearing mannerisms.
- Sometimes a board member doesn't listen, leading to a repetition of discussions in order to bring the individual up to speed.
- Some board members consistently create division in the board room. They fuel factions and subgroups, which prevent the board from more effectively handling its responsibilities.

Examples of Personality Behaviors include:

- Some board members have a pessimistic outlook. They zero in on what won't work and get stuck rather than building workable solutions.
- Self-enhancing board members consume time by focusing on themselves rather than the issue.
- Some board members don't have much to say. They may not understand the issue or not have the ability to advance the thinking of the board.

CONSEQUENCES

A weak board member disrupts the boardroom. The entire board ends up being less efficient and less focused. Board members become frustrated and resentful, displaying behaviors such as impatience and short tempers. The board may begin to marginalize the individual in an attempt to more efficiently get the work done. Important conversations start to occur outside the boardroom.

These individual board member behaviors can fuel the board splintering into subgroups that prohibit adequate discussion and progress. It's a quick step from splintered groups to all out infighting.

Board members can lose confidence in the board chair who doesn't effectively deal with the weak board member. They expect the chair to step up and either get the individual to contribute more effectively or to gracefully help the person leave the board.

The presence of weak board members can have an influence on the inclination of other board members to continue to serve on the board. The board's reputation can be so damaged that strong board candidates may be difficult to attract.

The consequences can spread to management as they experience frustration with the board, resulting in a loss of confidence.

ACTION STEPS

These weak behaviors continue because boards typically are hesitant to take the necessary steps to bring change. There may be the belief that the individual will self-correct, so everyone waits with hope that the next meeting will be different. The board may think that the chair is coaching the individual behind the scenes, when the chair is either unaware of the problem or uncertain how to proceed.

The first step in addressing such issues is for the board chair to recognize this problem and to take responsibility to address it.

This type of problem can sometimes be ameliorated when the individual is provided with a focus for how they might best contribute. Sometimes board members have a unique skill that is vital to the board. They go outside of their area of expertise and try to contribute in ways for which they are ill prepared. Helping an individual bring a laser-type focus on their one unique but vital skill can solve this problem.

The board chair may need to more actively manage the boardroom discussion and purposefully draw out the reticent board member. The chair needs to redirect discussions to shut down unproductive tangents and reclaim the focus. Sometimes people don't realize



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how their behaviors are disrupting the meeting. Board chairs have more opportunity to manage these behaviors during meetings than most realize.

There are times when a board member’s contribution may be made outside the formal board meeting. A quiet board member who makes their contributions in committee work or in other ways should be appreciated.

Other board members may be able to influence weak behaviors. A board member who has a close relationship with the weak board member might provide some unofficial coaching.

The board’s performance appraisal system needs to be comprehensive and courageous. It can then surface these problems and result in appropriate coaching around how to correct these issues. It is a good general practice for all board members to engage in self analysis about their functioning on the board. Such self analysis, while difficult to do, can be quite revealing in terms of one’s impact on the larger group. Boards often ask a third party to consult with board members to help increase their positive contributions and to help make changes to weak behaviors.

Board should have firm term limits established so that all board members know that the default option is to not stand for reelection. Individuals have to be actively invited to continue and that the starting assumption is that each board member will leave after their term is up.

CONCLUSIONS

The issues that come before boards are so complex and impactful that boards can’t afford to have weak board members. Steps must be taken or the board will have failed in its responsibilities to advance the organization for which they are responsible.



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