



LOP: A Model to Remove Board Members

The way board members leave is crucial. Don't leave it to chance.

BY JOSEPH C. SANTORA

While much attention has focused on the tenure of nonprofit executives, little research touches on the dismissal of board members. Serving on a nonprofit board is no easy task today. Board members play increasingly important roles and take on vast responsibilities to ensure the organization's fiscal health.

Unfortunately, some board members don't fulfill their duties or are a bad fit with the organization. Yet removing them from the board is problematic for many reasons. You may hesitate to remove a board member out of misguided loyalty or fear of airing dirty laundry in public. You may worry that a high-profile dismissal will reflect badly on your organization and your ability to attract funding.

The question thus arises: How do you get board members to tender their resignation in a way that is non-disruptive yet humane?

The LOP model provides an answer. It identifies three ways for people to leave the board:

1. Leave of Absence

Taking a leave of absence is the most benign way for board members to leave. This approach opens the door for them to return at a mutually agreed date. If they decide not to return later on, the board can seize the chance to acknowledge

their contributions at a well-publicized organizational event. The result is good rather than bad publicity for both the organization and the board member.

2. Ouster

The ouster is the most painful way to remove a board member. It causes the most hardship and creates enemies among colleagues and friends. At times ouster is necessary for a number of reasons: Board members may be unproductive or habitually absent from board meetings. They may blur the line between their role and that of the executive director. Or they may cause organizational chaos during executive committee meetings, behind the scenes, or at public meetings. If board members won't comply with requests from the board chair or other members of the board to resign, then the board has no recourse but to oust them from the board.

3. Personal Request

This strategy appeals to reason. Here the chairperson asks the board member to resign, explaining that the board member's value to the organization has been diminished and nothing positive can be gained by continuing. Ideally, the board member will do the right thing and resign, citing personal or professional reasons for doing so. Resigning saves face for the

board member, for the board itself, and for the organization. If the board member doesn't respond to the chairperson's personal request, then the board in its entirety must take the appropriate steps to vote the recalcitrant board member off the board.

Make the Options Clear

Serving on a board requires a major commitment. It also demands that board members assume distinct roles and responsibilities. If board members are uncomfortable with their roles or don't fulfill their responsibilities, they cannot continue on the board without harming the organization. The way they leave says a good deal.

As part of your board orientation, clarify the LOP (leave of absence, ouster, or personal request) model. Be sure prospective board members understand the three ways of leaving the board, and stress the importance of choosing an option other than the destructive ouster alternative. That way, board members will be ready with the best approach when it's time for them to say good-by. ■

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