

What If Your Board Takes Its Beef Public? Here's a helpful exercise for any board.



Q I'm on the local board of an established and respected national organization. Our executive director was recently fired by the national administration, and the community is quite upset.

There have been some emergency meetings regarding her firing. A couple of the board members are hosting those meetings and, to put it bluntly, adding fuel to the fire in the community.

Our board president is concerned that their actions don't mesh with their duties as board members, particularly since we have an obligation to the national organization. Do you have any thoughts?

A I would have to agree with your board president and — from the tone of your question — you. Board members often form close personal relationships with the executive director. It's easy to let those friendships override an objective evaluation of that person's competency or the organization's leadership needs, especially if the board felt the person was doing a good job.

But it's one thing to question the decision internally and quite another to go public. To participate in community meetings — let alone convene them — undermines respect for the organization and can do great harm if stakeholders lose trust in the organization.

Be Sure the Board Is Fulfilling Its Responsibilities

Board members have a responsibility to provide a unified front. The board president has every right — make that a responsibility — to ask board members to circle the wagons behind the national decision.

That everyone was so taken aback makes me question a number of things:

- Were the board members aware of the executive director's job description?
- Did they know she reported to the national organization?
- Did members have a say in the measures of success to which she was held?
- Did the national organization suggest to the board that this woman be given coaching to minimize the need for termination? Or, at the very least, did the national organization give fair warning about their concerns?

“Board members have a responsibility to provide a unified front.”

“Encourage people to talk about their shock and outrage.”

- Was any local evaluation done? If so, was it done by a limited few and not shared with the board as a whole?
- Or, was this a case of malfeasance?

Answers to these questions will suggest actions for moving forward with the next executive director and the national administration.

Put Your Crisis Plan into Motion

For now, you should implement your organization's crisis communication plan to stem the damage done in the community. (See "How to Handle a Crisis," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 12, No. 1, NonprofitWorld.org/members.)

Your organization's spokesperson might make a statement recognizing the beloved status of the recently-terminated executive director but assuring the public that this change is going to be positive for the community and explaining why. At the same time, the spokesperson should emphasize the value of rallying behind the organization during the transition.

I might suggest that the board chair call a board meeting solely for the purpose of letting board members air their anger and begin the healing process. At that meeting, encourage people to talk about their shock and outrage.

Then, urge them to talk about entering a new chapter in the organization's life. What do board members want to see as they move forward? How can they help ensure the next executive director is successful?

Ask Your Board to Perform This Exercise

Here's a helpful exercise for your board members to try:

1. **Make a list of the executive's successes** and good qualities.
2. **List qualities that had a negative impact** on the organization.
3. **Save the list of good qualities** in the record of the organization's history.
4. **Burn, bury, or flush away** the list of negatives.

Such an exercise allows the group to relegate the past to the past and ready itself to move forward unencumbered. **S**

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