

Beware of These Three Personality Pitfalls

Don't let these common personality types derail your board.

By Gary Cole

On nearly every board, there are three personality types that can distract from the important work of leadership. These personalities represent behaviors most often identified among board members as being potential barriers to an effective board. To nurture engagement, it's vital to understand how to handle them. Here's a rundown.

The Trusty Traditionalist

Slow-to-change traditionalists have trouble embracing new ideas and going against the status quo. Instead, they opt to remind everyone, "This is how we do things around here!"

You know who these board members are. They tend to sit in the same chairs at every meeting. They're loyal to the same vendors. And they unknowingly champion the same old approaches while ignoring the realities of the world we live in today.

On the other hand, they have a great deal to offer if you know how to approach them. To make the best of their personalities, keep the following in mind:

- **Traditionalists are loyal, trustworthy, and dependable.** You can count on them to do what they say, stick by your organization even in hard times, and fulfill their responsibilities.
- **You can confide in them and know your words won't go any further without your permission.** When a task requires the utmost discretion, responsibility, and trust, these are people you can turn to without worry.
- **Because they're dedicated to preserving traditions, they make great organizational historians.** Put them in charge of keeping the organization's records, history, and archives.
- **Traditionalists can adapt to new ideas if you provide them with the proper data and sell them on the practical value of making necessary changes.** Introduce change slowly, providing plenty of support along the way. Explain how the change will make their lives better in the end. Ask for their input, and listen carefully to what they say. Of course, this is the best way to introduce change for everyone, but it's especially crucial for traditionalists. If you spring something on them without the proper groundwork, they'll dig in their heels and fight to the death to retain the old ways.
- **Ask them to make certain that others meet the necessary deadlines.** With their goal-oriented personalities, they'll ensure that tasks are completed properly.
- **Since they want to do things the "right" way, they're the perfect choice for taking charge of policies and procedures.** They're also meticulous evaluators, so task them with monitoring and assessing the success of projects.
- **Always give traditionalists careful, complete, clear directions,** and keep them constantly updated. They hate ambiguity, changing details, and lack of structure. The more you can communicate with them on an ongoing basis, the more smoothly things will go.

The Bullish Bushwhacker

Both the board and staff will be challenged by bushwhackers' fire-ready-aim approach. These impatient board members are the most likely to exhibit rash emotional outbursts when irritated by what they perceive to be slow or indecisive behavior. In addition, comments from a traditionalist, such as "We've never done this before," will encourage a bushwhacker to break the rules simply for the thrill of it.

They may, on occasion, make you want to gnash your teeth. But you can turn their presence into a true gift with these suggestions:

- **Full of energy and optimism, bushwhackers are independent, fearless risk-takers.** Don't put them in charge of consensus building, process, or strategy. Leave that to the traditionalists, and provide bushwhackers with action-oriented jobs.
- **As soon as planning for a project is finished, give bushwhackers the first tasks to do.** With their rallying cry, "Stop planning and just do it already," they'll be raring to go and will get the project flying with their energy and initiative.
- **Offer them the stop watch at board meetings so they can assure you start and end on time and complete all agenda items.** Adept decision-makers, they'll take care that things are completed as efficiently as possible while cutting out wasted time and repetition.
- **Recognize them for their power and intellect.** While recognition is important for everyone, it's especially so for bushwhackers. You can often mitigate their impatience by reinforcing your gratitude for the things they do well.
- **Let them be the experimenters** when you need to try out something new and daring. They are trailblazers who aren't afraid of making mistakes or taking on new ventures. They will relish the challenge.

The Fun-Loving Fanatic

Fun-loving fanatics are typically the center of attention and eager to turn any project or discussion into a playful experience. They deplore structure and routine. While they're the most recognizable and sociable of all board members, they often spread themselves too thin and aren't always where they need to be, when they need to be there. Despite their shortcomings, they can be indispensable board members if you focus on their strengths.

- **Give them the chance to lead social activities, get-togethers, and interactive experiences.** Ask them to start off each board meeting with a quick getting-to-know-you exercise, such as having all members tell what they did last weekend, what book they're reading, or who their greatest hero is, and why. One


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of the best ways to create an effective board is to develop warm, caring relationships among board members, and that’s the specialty of the fun-loving fanatic.

- **Because they live in the moment, these enthusiastic people are apt to overextend themselves, saying “yes” to things they don’t have time to do.** Help them learn to say no. When they volunteer to take on yet another project, remind them of the important things they’re already doing, and encourage them not to commit to too much.
- **“Let’s have a party!” is their motto.** When there are entertainment duties of any kind, leverage their energy. (But give them a firm budget!)
- **Whenever possible, offer tasks that allow them to expand their thinking** and be creative.
- **Have them plan and lead exercises at retreats.** Whether it’s a weekend staff-board planning session or a two-hour board meeting held in an interesting locale, fun-loving fanatics will make sure everyone has a good time.
- **Don’t depend on them for sustained, methodical efforts** for which they have little patience. Offer them activities that are short-term rather than lengthy, hands-on rather than theoretical,

flexible rather than rigid. Take advantage of their ability to thrive in the midst of chaos, negotiate among many diverse people, and build strong teams.

- **When you want to introduce new ideas,** ask these fun-lovers to help you do so in ways that are creative, mind-catching, and playful.
- **Don’t give them jobs that involve following up** after an event or project. They enjoy being immersed in the moment rather than following through afterwards.
- **They’ll enjoy visiting or calling donors** to thank them for their support, especially if they can do so along with others. Have them put together teams to make phone calls or personal visits with donors. Ask them to provide treats to turn a call-a-thon into a mini-party.
- **Let them shake board meetings up** in their own playful way. Of course, you’ll want to rein them in enough so that agenda items are covered. But everyone needs to relax, laugh, and have fun, too. Lightness and humor have a crucial role to play in the board room. 

Gary Cole, Executive Vice President of Pursuant Consulting (pursuantgroup.com) has spent his entire professional career working with nonprofit organizations and the donors who support them in hope of building a better society. He has played an integral role in building fundraising teams and programs as well as directing and providing counsel to campaigns ranging from \$1 million to \$500 million for nonprofit organizations across the United States.

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