

“Board” to Tears

Five steps to establishing a dysfunctional board of directors that will ruin staff morale, fail to meet funding goals, and drive you crazy within six months

BY JULIE MILLER DOWLING



If your board meetings are too friendly and productive, these “anti-tips” will get you moving in the wrong direction. DIEGO CERVO/ISTOCKPHOTO.COM

Are your meetings with your board of directors characterized by respectful discussions, steady progress toward organizational goals, and mutual agreement on top priorities? Have you achieved that Zen-like state of harmony, in which your shelter’s staff and board members function as one cohesive machine, speaking to the public and donors with one voice, driving the animal advocacy message within your community?

BOR-ing! It sounds like your organization needs a little dysfunction and strife. There are plenty of animal welfare organizations out there that can point the way: Tension between shelter staff and shelter boards is rampant in

the field, largely due to basic misunderstandings about the roles board members should play.

If you’re feeling the need to add more stress to your life, if you really don’t like sleeping that much, if you’re looking for trouble ... you’ve come to the right place. Follow the tips below and you’ll be well on your way to a poorly run board of directors and a threatened humane organization.

(We know you’ll read between the lines as you go through these “anti-tips,” nodding your head in agreement or shaking it in dismay. You’ll likely come up with a plan for making your board better—and that plan starts with *not* making these all-too-common mistakes.)

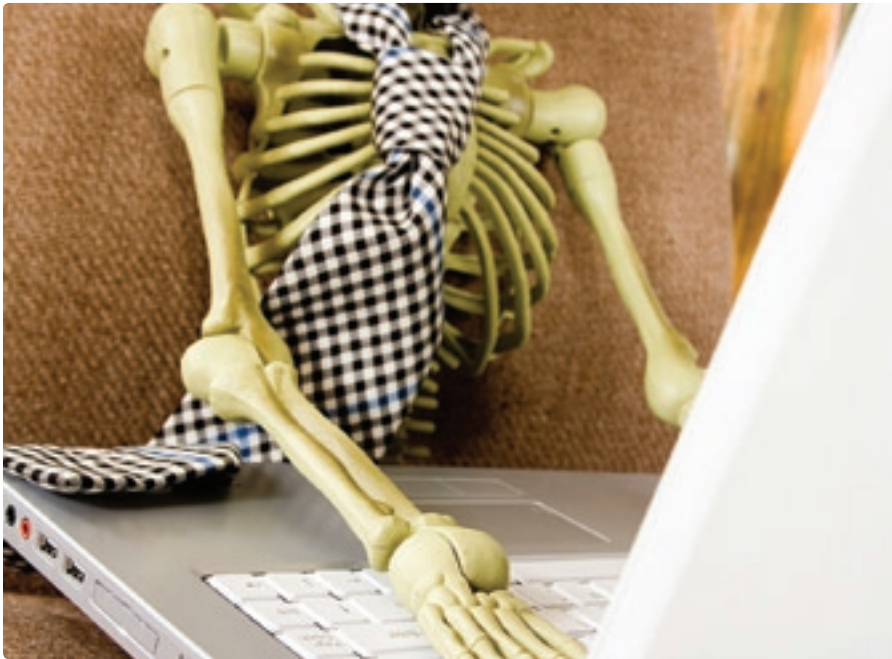
#1 TIP FOR TROUBLE

When seeking board members, accept any and all animal lovers.

Accept the oddly dressed lady who loves cats so much she had several kittens protruding from her pockets last time she stopped by. Accept the guy who breeds pitt-weilers in his shed and brings you “donations” of puppies. Heck, accept kids—they love animals! They can *learn* how to cultivate major donors.

After all, your organization has a mission to improve the lives of animals. Shouldn’t the primary qualification of any board member be an animal devotion to match?

“That’s great, and of course you want people who care about animals and who buy into your mission,” says Sarah Hayes,



If your board members have started looking a little thin, you should think about establishing term limits.
PAMELA MOORE/ISTOCKPHOTO.COM

chief executive officer of the Monroe County Humane Association (MCHA) in Bloomington, Ind. “But a lot of times that passion for animals is not enough, and is not what you need for your board.” What you need is professionals from diverse backgrounds with particular skills that will help them set long-term organizational goals, enhance fundraising capacity, and promote your mission within the community.

“Many smaller nonprofits struggle with building a board and may, in a panic, grab willing ‘warm bodies’ that can turn into your worst nightmare,” says Hayes. “Boards should be identifying the needs of the organization, what they need their board members to do, what skill sets are needed for a balanced board.”

While respect and affection for animals are great qualities, you need a board of directors that will do more than just ooh and ahh about the latest litter of adorable puppies brought to your surrender counter. A good board of directors will ooh and ahh—and then help you explain to the public why more litters of puppies are not, actually, what your organization or the community needs.

A rigorous recruitment process helps the SPCA of Central Florida in Orlando find potential board members. First, re-

cruits meet with board president Barbara Wetzler for a behind-the-scenes tour of the shelter. Wetzler talks to interviewees about their backgrounds, interests, and availability and explains the board’s functions and responsibilities. If the candidate makes it past this step, says Wetzler, she brings the potential board member to the shelter for some hands-on volunteer experience. “Even though our board is a governing, fundraising board, I want the recruit to experience a taste of what our staff do every day ... to make our agency run effectively,” says Wetzler.

Only after the candidate gets through a telephone interview with another board member, lunch with a few more, and receives positive feedback from both parties, will her name go before the full board for a vote.

Potential recruits should have a clear idea about what they’ll need to do as board members—not just the time commitment involved, but the kind of activities they’ll be helping with. “This means you need to be very clear from the get-go about what members of your board are expected to do,” says Hayes.

This can also help well-meaning but unprepared animal lovers self-select out of the board selection process—or seek

training for potentially “scary” board duties like fundraising. “From the beginning of their tenure, board members are briefed on what is expected of them,” says Elizabeth Freitas, president of the board of the Kauai Humane Society in Hawaii. “When members do not feel at ease or capable of their responsibilities, training is provided for them immediately. We have a board governance committee to ensure board members are kept competent and comfortable to fulfill their roles.”

#2 TIP FOR TROUBLE

Encourage your board to sweat the small stuff.

If you really want to scuttle your board’s effectiveness quickly—and drive shelter staff up a wall in the process—get board members involved in making decisions over procedural minutia. When is the best time to clean out the cages? What type of computer software should the shelter get? Should we allow apartment-dwellers to adopt large dogs? What kind of food is best for guinea pigs?

If your board spends the bulk of its two-hour meeting on these issues, it will fail utterly in fulfilling its primary role. Board members “shouldn’t think that they’re coming on board to do the day-to-day work of your organization,” says Hayes.

It can be hard to get board members to focus on the bigger picture, says Aileen Gabbey, executive director of the Maryland SPCA in Baltimore. After all, the tasks that are routine for shelter staff can be entrancing for those who aren’t in the trenches. Gabbey’s board is functioning well now, but was mired in the details for a while.

“The minutia of day-to-day stuff was fascinating to the board because it’s very animal-related and everyone can sink their teeth into that,” says Gabbey. “It’s a lot harder to focus on budget issues and long-term planning. ... Sometimes a whole meeting would be spent discussing what adoption fees were for, instead of what was the goal for adoptions this year.”

Those little details are not what a board of directors should be dealing with, Gabbey says. It’s the board’s job to sight the destination; it’s the executive director and her staff who figure out how to get there.

It is the board that is legally responsible for governing the organization and making policy. That's why it's dangerous to fill a board with folks who become so entrenched in hands-on issues that they overlook essential duties of strategic planning, fundraising, and financial oversight.

According to the Independent Sector, a national organization that promotes charity and nonprofit work, the ideal board of directors "is fully informed about all the workings of the organization, but it remains focused on general policy and long-range goals. In all but very small or emerging groups, the responsibility for day-to-day management is delegated to the executive director."

If your board can't differentiate between management and governance, try the following:

- Create lists of board tasks and staff tasks; share them with both groups.
- Hold periodic discussions on the board's role.
- Make sure board members understand the chain of command; the executive director reports to the board president, not to random board members.
- Strike management issues from board meeting agendas.
- Make sure the board chair knows how to steer meetings.
- Provide regular information and training.
- Make sure executive staff aren't sending mixed signals by inviting the wrong kind of board assistance.
- Stop individual board members from meddling in daily procedures.

#3 TIP FOR TROUBLE

Forget term limits! Let them petrify in their chairs.

Hey, your board is terrific. They work well together, they all get along, they've known each other for years. So what if the chair has been there since Reagan was in office? Does it matter if they're looking a little, well, cobwebbed?

It does matter. The sheltering field evolves, and the larger business community evolves as well. And if your members have been there so long that they resist all changes, even those that would be good

for the organization, it's time to do some rotating. Institutional memory is a valuable thing, but when it prevents forward progress, it can be crippling.

To borrow from the stylings of Jeff Foxworthy, if your board secretary writes the meeting minutes with a burned stick, you might want to consider term limits. If the last time you rotated board members, Hawaii wasn't a state, you might want to consider term limits. If your current board helped your shelter get through the hurricane ... Hurricane Camille ... it's probably time to dust off the section in your bylaws that talks about term limits.

Otherwise, your organization could suffer from the same "founders' syndrome" that plagued the MCHA a few years back. "We had a group of people who had been on the board for a very long time, and we didn't have proper term limits," says Hayes. "There was a sense of ownership and an unwillingness to change. Of course the organization is what it is because of past efforts. But 'founders' syndrome' can be very difficult, because people can't let go."

Sticking to term limits means you'll need fresh recruits. "Life happens," says Hayes. "Members move, or they no longer have time to devote. So it's important to constantly identify potential new members and have a succession plan, so if someone has to leave, you have someone waiting in the wings who could easily step in to the role without having to start all over again."

The Maryland SPCA now has a year-round board development committee that handles recruiting and other tasks such as attending to bylaws and arranging board training. Ideas about board structure aren't static; what was popular in the '70s may not be touted by today's board-governance gurus. There's no single right way to structure a board of directors, so don't replicate another organization's. Instead, consider your organization's environment, culture, history, personalities, goals, and challenges to create a unique board model that suits your agency. And remember, if you set up your board the right way, previous members can later rotate back on to serve.



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Typical Responsibilities of Shelter Boards of Directors

- Develop the humane organization's program mission and policies, and make sure they're followed
- Ensure the organization lives up to its legal and ethical responsibilities
- Oversee finances and make sure the organization has adequate resources
- Review and approve long-range and annual operating plans and budgets
- Serve as the organization's community ambassador
- Recruit, appoint, support, and supervise the executive director
- Select, elect, and educate new board members
- Make sure the board and organization stay effective by monitoring and evaluating their performance

Resources

animalsheltering.org

For back issues of *Animal Sheltering*, an entire resource library of materials, and an A to Z index of shelter management and operations topics.

humanesocietyu.org

For online and regional courses on humane leadership and a wealth of other shelter training materials.

boardsource.org

For resources from a nonprofit organization dedicated to strengthening boards of directors through consulting work and educational publications.

#4 TIP FOR TROUBLE

Board members fighting? Buy popcorn and enjoy the show.

Conflict! Passive aggressive behavior! Sniping! We love it. It drives reality T.V., makes rush hour more exciting, and makes family get-togethers more of a thrill. And think how much fun board meetings will be when the board chair throws a stapler at the executive director.

Personality clashes and disagreements are to be expected in a diverse group—why not let conflict play itself out?

While you want a diverse board whose members feel comfortable voicing their opinions, the board chair needs to manage conflict. Boards without ground rules to guarantee civility have split apart. In extreme cases, embittered board members have left and formed a new organization, and the rest of the board has been left behind to repair the damage. When board conflict starts affecting morale, it can ripple through the entire organization.

"Poor communication is a biggie," says Hayes. "And even if you're communicating, there may be some people who aren't listening or on the same page, anyway. It all ties back to when you first approach someone to be a board member: Be crystal clear about what you're asking them to do, and have that conversation from the get-go. It's [about] creating a culture of shared values, respect, integrity, collaboration, and communication."

It's not just conflict within the board that can cause dysfunction. Board experts emphatically state that the relationship between the board and the executive director is so critical that it can literally make or break an organization. Kim Intino, now director of Animal Sheltering Issues at The Humane Society of the United States, says she should have known trouble lay ahead when she went to interview for the director's job at a shelter and the board member who was to interview her was climbing out of the facility's dumpster when she pulled in.

Intino got the job, but she almost wished she hadn't. "They praised me for all my experience and education, then proceeded to second guess every choice I made from medical treatments to eutha-

nasia to staff schedules," she says. Most of her time was spent in the metaphorical dumpster, dealing with conflicts generated by a dysfunctional board dominated by one particularly difficult member.

If the board has done its job, selecting members who respect the organization's fundamental policies and mission and who are able to govern and get along with others, one poison pill—or a clique of them!—shouldn't damage the board's ability to make group decisions. But if a couple of hotheads are threatening your board's ability to govern, here a few tips to help leaders get things back under control:

- Lay some ground rules—no talking out of turn or criticizing others during meetings, for example. Make etiquette an agenda item at your next meeting.
- Take the reins. The board president should identify and handle conflict. If the troublemaker takes charge, the problems will continue.
- Divert the passion into constructive tasks. If possible, move the troublemaker to a different committee that better fits his interests.
- Pull the troublemaker aside for a private meeting. Listen to her complaints, discuss appropriate behavior, and invite her suggestions for resolving the issue.
- Get outside help from a consultant if your board is being dragged down by destructive members.
- Remove the problem. It's a drastic step, but some boards have had to remove a board member when all else has failed.

#5 TIP FOR TROUBLE

Expect board members to have psychic abilities.

They're on your board so they already know all the governance fundamentals of nonprofits and all the complex issues within the animal care field—and if they don't, they should be able to figure them out. They should close their eyes and *feel* their way to effectiveness, the way Uri Geller used to bend spoons using only the power of his mind.

Well, Geller may have had remarkable ways with the silverware, but your board members will only be able to use the power of their minds if they first put



Clarifying expectations about the board's role and duties will ensure that board members won't have to use one of these to figure it out. TOM YOUNG/ISTOCKPHOTO.COM

good materials in them. Many organizations forget that no matter how smart people are, no matter how professionally accomplished, no one is born with an understanding of how to be a good board member. And many organizations leave their boards in the dark to figure it out—and then are frustrated when they don't.

Some of the troublemaking board members who make your life more difficult may simply need more guidance. Gabbey, who encourages her board to attend seminars on board governance, once invited a micromanaging board member to attend a nonprofit seminar. It made a huge difference: "She took what she learned and presented it to the whole board," says Gabbey. "This made a much bigger impact than if I had said it."

If you want your board of directors to empower your organization, your organization needs to invest in its board of directors. It takes time and effort to keep board members informed, trained, and engaged, says Hayes, but it's time well spent. "[That] board member from a bank [certainly has] financial expertise," she says, "but she may not have nonprofit experience or know a whole lot about the workings of animal welfare. You have to take that time to engage them and help them understand the issues so they can make the right decisions."

Ongoing board education can include a training portion at each board meeting, guest or staff speakers, outside

workshops or seminars, board retreats, board manuals, information packets, prepared reports, organization newsletters, monthly e-mailed updates, and subscriptions to publications that will help them get a broader view of the field (dare we suggest *Animal Sheltering*?).

Be creative: Gabbey shares one good animal story at every board meeting, telling board members that she wants them to have "something in their pocket" to talk about at a cocktail party. "I want them to be able to say, 'We did a record number of spay/neuters this year,' or 'Wait until you hear about how we saved the life of this kitten who was abandoned in an alley,'" says Gabbey.

As you develop your own board by methodically *not* following any of our tips for trouble, remember one last fundamental tip for a disappointing and stress-filled relationship with your board: *Never* acknowledge your board members' commitment to the organization, and be sure *never* to thank them for all they do.

After all, that kind of mutual respect and appreciation could lead to happier and more productive board members, greater organizational success, an improved reputation for your shelter, and more resources for your animals. And then what would you have to talk about during your therapy sessions? AS

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