

When That Chapter Board Member Won't Quit



Many association chapter boards have at least one difficult board member. You know the one: the person who should have stepped down a while ago but continues to hang on, throwing temper tantrums when they hear something they disagree with, disrupting chapter Board meetings, not meeting deadlines, or refusing to change, even when the rest of the board agrees there is a better way to do something (trying to change the format of your Lunch & Learns or move to an association management system sound familiar?).



Whether the person is actively a jerk or being a passive one, a difficult board member can negatively impact your entire chapter organization. So, what do you do when you know you need this person to leave, but they refuse to step down?

3 Ways to Terminate a Board Member

Legally. Use the removal clause of your chapter bylaws to terminate the Board member. Some association chapters have a provision in their bylaws that allow them to remove a board member before the end of their term if they miss a certain number of meetings or also allow a person to be removed by taking a vote. What do yours say? This is where keeping your chapter bylaws up to date is so important. Without these, terminating a board member before the end of their term could be legally problematic for your chapter.

Passively. You could gradually remove the board member's influence, taking away their responsibilities, letting their term run out or not renewing them for another term. But depending on how much trouble a person has become, waiting for their term to end can be painful as the person continues to be disruptive to the board and the chapter, especially if they have significant time left. And while you wait for the end, there's a good chance the bad behavior will continue.

Compassionately but directly. This is often the best option, but it can be hard. Few people feel comfortable having tough conversations that have the potential to escalate or at the least be very uncomfortable for both parties. But when done correctly, open, honest conversations are a good way to get both sides to understand each other and get the board member to choose to be an active, engaged participant or step down.

Have that Compassionate, Direct Conversation with a Problem Board Member

Here are eight ideas for making these conversations go more smoothly and get the outcome you're hoping for.

Don't corner the person. Ask for a meeting. Finding the person at a chapter event and wanting to talk at that moment can put the person on the defensive. Set up a time to meet and give the person an idea of what you want to talk about, which can give them time to be prepared.

Have concrete examples of how their behavior is disruptive. They may not realize that missing the last three meetings has kept the board from taking important votes. Or that not following through on assignments has kept you from adding a service that chapter members have been asking for.

Ask what they think about being on the board. Do they enjoy being a board member and being part of the larger team? Is it what they thought the job would be? You may learn that they really want to step down or you may learn they enjoy it but there is something else going on that's keeping them from being 100 percent effective.

Ask if anything has changed at home or work. They may want to do a good job, but something could be keeping them from doing that, like a work issue or a problem at home. Asking gives the person an opportunity to share any reasons behind their behavior. It also gives you the chance to connect and empathize with them, which could be all they need to change their behavior.



Acknowledge you know that they have the best interest of the organization in mind.

Assume and acknowledge that the Board member has good intentions but that whatever else is going on is leading to outcomes that aren't great for the chapter. This shifts the conversation away from blaming the Board member for things going wrong in the chapter.

Recognize that Board service can be challenging for every Board member. There's a good chance each of your Board members has done something they aren't proud of in their role, from raising their voice in a meeting, to missing a deadline or not following through on a commitment. This isn't an easy job to have, especially when they most likely already have a paying job.

Ask how you can help. This shows the person that you care. Maybe making a meeting 15 minutes later would allow them to get there on time or serving food at board meetings could make the person not have to rush home to eat – and be nicer during a meeting.

Give them the chance to recommit or step down. At the end of the conversation, ask the Board member to recommit to meeting the expectations and responsibilities that come with being a board member or to resign from the Board. If they commit to staying on the board, be sure to schedule a follow up to check in. And ask that if the Board member still isn't fulfilling the recommitment, they will resign.

Board memberships are never expected to be permanent. With each new member, dynamics shift; sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. When a board member is causing more problems than helping, unless there is a real reason for their actions, it may be time for them to step down. And when you know how to have the right conversation, getting them to recommit or step down can be a lot easier on everyone.

