

Housecalls at Work

Answers from Dr. Insite

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Dr. Insite is an ongoing column to address people-related issues in nonprofit organizations. For answers to your workplace issues, please e-mail your questions to DrInsite@coreinsites.com. All responses will be handled confidentially.

DEAR DR. INSITE:

My association board is a great group – energetic, engaged and dedicated. However, there are also a few “characters” that seem determined to undermine and negate every new idea or suggestion. Sometimes their negativity is infectious and brings the whole group down. How do I manage these uncooperative personalities?

DEAR ASSOCIATION LEADER:

Dealing with contrary members can be difficult. The challenge is to keep constructive disagreement over issues from degenerating into dysfunctional interpersonal conflict. Consider these guidelines so everyone benefits from the perspectives of all members:

- **Develop norms to encourage cooperation and group respect.** Decide what behaviors distract or weaken the group dynamic. For example, initiating side conversations, dominating conversation, finger-pointing and name-calling can deter the effectiveness of the group. Set norms to guide acceptable behavior and define

the ways these behaviors will be treated.

- **Set time limits for discussions.** Disagreements can often escalate, continuing much too long and consuming unnecessary group time. Decide on a time limit for debates and make sure that all sides of an issue are treated equally. Assign a time keeper to ensure that the predetermined timeframe is enforced.
- **Confirm a process for ending or tabling a dispute.** Agree on a method of resolution. What decision-making process will the group use – majority vote, unanimous agreement or consensus? In which situations will a task force be assigned to investigate an issue? Leaving a debate hanging without a conclusion can lead to resentment and frustration.
- **Focus on the facts.** Having more information encourages people to focus on issues, not personalities. Without good data, people waste time debating opinions. Facts keep discussion focused on the central issues and minimize the potential for interpersonal conflict.

- **Channel your challengers.** Consider incorporating the specific role of “devil’s advocate” in each meeting. Rotate the position among all members. In this way, the group will always take the time to question ideas and promote critical thinking.

Disagreements about ideas can enhance group process, but only if they are expressed constructively. Creating a professional atmosphere where all opinions are welcomed will ultimately energize board members and generate creative and innovative results. ●

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