Snippet #165
Board Bullies

It's tempting to characterize bad behavior by labeling the person who exhibits it – perhaps this snippet should have been titled "Bullying Behavior." Name-calling is a copout because we don't have to set standards and hold people accountable. Remove the "bully" and the problem is solved. But is it really?

What is a bully? A common definition is someone who forces others to do or say something against their will; bullying is imposing one's will on others. The playground bully is big and mean, but someone exhibiting bullying behavior in a board meeting might appear charming, while acting in a vicious manner. Here are some behaviors that should be curtailed by the chair or protested by the directors.

Rebuttal behavior – starts when Director #1 makes a proposal and Director #2 disagrees, questions, or rejects all or part of it. Director #1 then insists on rebutting after each speaker (to set the record straight, of course). If a board discussion is to be kept as a dialogue among equals, there is no right of rebuttal. Instead of a group discussion, one director is given unlimited debate time and the other directors are forced to defend their opinions instead of sharing them.

Know-it-all behavior – usually comes from someone to whom everyone turns for a historical perspective or procedural guidance. Or, a board might assume expertise that doesn't exist (like expecting a lawyer to know parliamentary procedure when there is not a single class in any law school teaching the subject). Suddenly, one person has more influence that anyone else in the group. Very often the person who seems most sure of a parliamentary rule is completely incorrect, especially if they have not engaged in serious study of parliamentary procedure or earned advanced parliamentary credentials. This behavior is even more destructive when it comes from the chair because it can cause resentment if the chair "hogs the spotlight" by answering questions about matters that were assigned to others.

Manipulative behavior – predetermining the outcome of the meeting means that a fundamental principle has been ignored, that is, the right of the majority to decide the outcome after a full and fair debate. No one person has all the answers. The purpose of a board is to bring multiple perspectives together to arrive at the best solution. Until they have heard the debate, how can directors decide?

Team player demands – or a demand for "consensus" – are also forms of bullying behavior. Encouraging teamwork might take the form of giving a new director guidance to be a team player and stay quiet, listen, and learn the ropes before participating, which belittles the contribution of someone with a different perspective. Pressure to agree with prevailing opinions rather than raise concerns disheartens thoughtful and responsible directors, whether characterized as teamwork or working toward consensus. Common consensus methods involve exerting pressure on those who do not agree with a motion, having them explain why they don't agree, and exerting pressure to "come to consensus."

Belittling or disparaging remarks – can be aimed at other directors to discredit them. For example: "I'm sure you wouldn't know about this" or "You don't understand our traditions" or "Of course you wouldn't be aware of this" are all belittling remarks. Within this category are also the naysaying remarks, such as "We tried that before and it didn't work" or bringing back items that have already been settled to try to change them, even though the vote was decisive.

Even the best of intentions can result in bullying behavior. Bullying behavior often stems from insecurities, so help those who exhibit it feel valued. Confront the issues as a board. Set your standards and evaluate after each meeting whether they were attained. Bring bullying behavior out into the light of day.