

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Discovering what sets rockstar directors apart
- » Recognizing the bad behaviors of bad actors
- » Figuring out how to deal with difficult personalities

Bonus Chapter **1**

Ten Board Director Types

Even the most organized and knowledgeable board directors are tested the moment they walk into the boardroom because every person has their own personality, quirks, and ways of working. Some people are natural amplifiers and team-builders, while others may slow or disrupt the board.

In this chapter, we talk about ten common personalities you may encounter on your board. They aren't all negative, and not all of the negatives are fatal. We try to give you tips on how to boost the best bits while managing the rest with grace.

The Champion

If you serve on a board, you should strive to be a champion. These are the people who jump wholeheartedly into the work of board service. They take onboarding and self-education seriously and show up prepared to contribute in meetings and strategic discussions. They check their egos at the door and are willing to have their ideas challenged. Here are other ways you can model champion board service:

- » Engage outside the boardroom and actively promote the organization and its mission throughout your network. Talk up your service. Share photos and reports. Bring friends into volunteer work. Make your board service a part of your public life.

- » Raise your hand when you have the capacity, even if it's for something that will require a little stretching or growing.
- » Commit financially with a gift that's meaningful to you, and inspire others to give.
- » Partner with the CEO, giving advice when invited, lending your subject matter expertise, and supporting them as they navigate the challenges of leadership.
- » Embrace diversity and actively cultivate an inclusive boardroom.
- » Thank the staff, volunteers, and fellow directors for all their hard work.

The Visionary

Some board directors walk into the room already thinking about the future. They are bold, bring entrepreneurial energy, and are comfortable with the unknown. In conversation, they question the status quo and often challenge the group to think beyond what is and into what could be strategically possible. These high-level dreamers are your visionaries.

In a world that's always changing, the visionary is a critical director on your board. They help keep you out of the weeds and get creative when big problems pop up. You want to set them up on the strategic planning front, where you can put their dreaming to good use. You also should leverage their energy to inspire donors and to advocate out in the community alongside your champions (see the preceding section).



TIP

If you're a visionary, look out for these blind spots:

- » Setting unrealistic expectations that leave people feeling demoralized
- » Underestimating the time, resources, or capacity needed to bring a vision to life
- » Being so future-focused that you overlook the present-day realities or dismiss short-term problems
- » Forgetting to celebrate the wins along the way
- » Losing patience with the process or when the board needs to focus on the details

The Pragmatist

These practical, results-driven individuals are critical team members who help you get things done! In the boardroom, pragmatists cut through theoretical conversations or long-range thinking and push the group toward the today and the concrete. They promote data-driven decision-making, are natural inoculators against groupthink, and place value on measurable outcomes. Pragmatists ask the hard questions and make sure people are clear on how to take the next step.



TIP

If you find you fall into the pragmatist camp, here are things to watch out for:

- » Failing to think strategically or being unwilling to make short-term tradeoffs for long-term goals
- » Being uncomfortable with ambiguity and inflexible in the face of change
- » Being averse to risk-taking, especially if ideas are highly aspirational or creative
- » Underestimating the social/emotional elements, like morale and culture, that are bolstered by visionary and long-range thinking

The Connector

Connectors are super-networkers who have a large community and a good reputation they're willing to put to work for the benefit of your mission. But this label is more than just knowing lots of people and being an ambassador: Connectors understand who to connect to achieve certain goals and do the leg work to make it happen.



WARNING

Be thoughtful in how you leverage your connectors. They can be your secret weapon for growing your donor base, but you don't want to over-ask. Each request they make on the organization's behalf costs social capital. Prioritize your needs and bring only the most important to them.

And, if you're a Connector, be thoughtful in how you leverage your network. You are great at what you do because people trust you! Make sure the connections you are making are meaningful to both the organization and the individual.



TIP

You can become a better connector by doing the following:

- » Getting out into the community and building authentic relationships with volunteers, program participants, and donors
- » Sharing your story, and the story and impact of the organization you're serving, with people you meet
- » Looking for opportunities to connect people you meet with things that would be personally exciting to them
- » Doing your homework before events and meetings so you know who'll be there and who you may want to meet

The Expert

Everyone brings expertise in some form or fashion. In the boardroom, experts are often tasked with leading or weighing in on projects or strategic initiatives that fall into their domains. They can help build consensus on challenging topics by sharing their knowledge, help tiebreak certain types of conversations, and even provide service pro bono at times. Here are some experts you may want on your board:

- » Financial professionals, including accountants and bookkeepers, investment advisors, insurance agents, and bankers
- » Lawyers across a wide array of specialties, including contracts, employment, real estate, intellectual property, and more
- » Government workers or lawmakers, especially if you're looking to advocate for your organization's mission in the public domain
- » Human resources professionals, especially if you have employees
- » Engineers, architects, or real estate professionals if your organization has to manage facilities or land
- » Nonprofit professionals who can bring experience and knowledge of good governance and sector best practices
- » Fundraising professionals or current/former nonprofit fundraisers



WARNING

Experts don't relieve you of your fiduciary authority. You still need to know the numbers, read up on major contracts, and weigh in on board matters. Think of experts as advisors — people who can help your board minimize its blind spots, ask better questions, and make higher quality judgments. Additionally, being the expert on a particular topic doesn't give you free rein to shut down discussion or the authority to be the final voice on a vote. Your job is to provide insight into issues rather than speak on behalf of the entire board.

The Traditionalist



WARNING

Traditionalists are a bit of a wild card. On one hand, they've been around a long time and usually bring deep institutional knowledge about the organization, its programs and donor relationships, and the community that can be an incredible asset. They're often the ones who can explain why things are structured the way they are, where certain traditions came from, and what has been tried before . . . because they were likely there for it! They're committed to the organization, have a passion for stability and sustainability, and show up prepared to talk.

Traditionalists can also be extremely stubborn and resistant to new ideas or big changes. You've probably heard their telltale phrase: "Well, we've always done it that way." Votes may be blocked or new initiatives stalled, all because they can't cope with doing things differently.

If you have a traditionalist on your board, here's what to do:

- » Give them a role that plays into their institutional knowledge, supporting things like fundraising and governance.
- » Consult them on new ideas early; they're less likely to resist something they've helped with.
- » Don't let the "We've always done it that way" line go unchallenged. Redirect the conversation to "Is this still serving us?"
- » Bring and share data because they often respond better to facts.
- » When appropriate, have them speak alongside staff at town halls or panels about the history of the organization and their commitment to the cause after all their years of service.
- » Utilize their knowledge and expertise in orientation settings or board education opportunities to provide context on how the organization is progressing/growing.



TIP

Though institutional knowledge is invaluable, the friction points that come with traditionalists are more common than not with long-tenured directors. We strongly recommend term limits, which create a natural exit point (for everyone) and ensure no one stays too long. Chapter 8 has details on putting term limits into your bylaws.

The Micromanager

Micromanagers never think they're micromanaging. And yet, everyone around them knows exactly what it looks like: responding to the executive's updates with a list of follow-up demands, showing up to events and redirecting staff, asking to review grant proposals, dropping into the office unannounced to "see how things are going." We often catch micromanagers overstepping operations, excessively monitoring work, or controlling how things get done. Sometimes it's to the point where staff feels frustrated or suffocated by the person's involvement.



WARNING

If you leave these folks unchecked, they'll micromanage the organization into the ground. This behavior is untenable for board service. Directors are *volunteers*, and both trust and partnership are necessary for nonprofit boards to be successful. If coaching doesn't result in a rapid change of behavior, we recommend you have the micromanager exit the board.

If you find yourself guilty of micromanaging, here are things you can do to do better:

- » **Focus on the big picture.** You should be thinking about the what and why of what's going on in the organization, not how it's actually getting done. When discussing programs and performance, stay focused on outcomes and strategic goals while setting aside your personal preferences.
- » **Squash perfectionism.** As long as your goals are achieved and with impact, let go of the details. When a task is yours, do it your way. When it belongs to someone else, let them do it theirs.
- » **Before you speak, ask yourself, "Is what I am about to say true, necessary, and kind?"** If what you're going to say isn't a true or verified statement/fact, doesn't help move the conversation forward or help others gain insight, or lift up those in the room or those who have helped/contributed to the project.
- » **Go back to your board job description.** Your job description can ground you if you feel that you're starting to speak in business jargon or questioning the executive director too much in a meeting.



WARNING

A wise leader once said, “The board should ask you about how your marketing plan is going, not what colors you’re using for the marketing materials.” The board needs to understand which questions are strategic and which may be overstepping into operations.

The Ruler

Let the eye-rolls begin. This self-appointed ruler of the boardroom is one of the worst types of directors. They’re grandstanding, often arrogant, and utterly convinced that the organization can’t function without them. This director is the one who treats every board meeting as a stage. They’re “my way or the highway” in every sense, holding discussions hostage and crowding out other voices until their opinion is the only one left standing. They aren’t team players; they’re hijackers of discussion. You can often find a director who’s guilty of being a ruler:

- » Arriving late and expecting the meeting to restart from the beginning, refusing to vote until they have a say, or sending long emails to the full board before meetings to pre-announce their position
- » Insisting their table at the gala be seated first, threatening to withhold their network if things aren’t done their way, or demanding to be featured in a program or on stage
- » Expecting the executive to consult them on decisions outside their governance role or treating staff members like their personal assistants

Look out for the two common types of rulers: *Tyrant rulers* dial up the toxic behaviors by several notches, causing extreme chaos and board disruption that’s hard to recover from. They grind the board to a halt, get aggressive with those who disagree with or disobey their requests, and create an unsafe space for dialogue. The only thing you can do in this case is fire them. Otherwise you risk losing the whole board. Flip to Chapter 8 for details on how to remove a director.

The *well-intentioned ruler* is often misdirecting their energy or hyper-focused on an issue that’s causing them to spiral out. They may be confused about why or how decisions are made and then force that confusion onto the board or staff (hopefully not both). But their heart is in the right place. Coach them toward channeling their energy in a way that aligns better with the board code of conduct.



WARNING

No two rulers are exactly the same, but the impact of ones left unchecked always is: Voices disappear, the work suffers, the executive burns out, and good board directors walk away.

The Ghost

Boo! Did we scare you? Well, this director's appearance at a board meeting just may. Ghosts were engaged and committed board directors once, but they started fading somewhere along the way. They stopped responding to emails promptly (or at all), missed meetings and events, and either quit giving or started needing a lot of prompting to do it. If you're lucky enough to hear from them at all, you'll probably get a string of reasons.

If a ghost is haunting your board, it's time to find out why they are and decide whether to reengage them or to simply let them move on. If all else fails, fire them. No, seriously. If a director routinely fails to show up to board meetings or committee work, board leadership should take action to remove that individual from the board or committee. This measure is more of a protective one than a punitive one. No one can fulfill their duty of care — which requires them to attend meetings, stay informed, and actively participate — if they aren't present. Find out more about how to remove a board director in Chapter 8.

The Bully

Bullies do whatever they can to get their way. Like the ruler we discuss earlier in the chapter, the bully speaks so loudly, defiantly, or overwhelmingly that others fear speaking up. It creates division and toxicity and undermines the professionalism necessary for effective boards. Bullies can also be vindictive, singling out staff members or board directors as scapegoats for anything that goes wrong. They stall progress when things don't go their way, attack at every mistake, and lash out at every perceived slight.



TIP

Bullying doesn't always look obvious in the moment. Here are some instances of bullying behavior we've seen: interrupting, talking over, or shutting down other directors; going behind the executive director's back; gossiping about fellow directors, staff, or the executive; sharing confidential information with community members or donors; getting offended or angry when directors or leaders push back; spreading rumors or misrepresenting what others said; sending hostile emails or texts to directors; bulldozing meetings with blame and personal attacks; treating staff members like their personal assistants; using their outside influence, wealth, or relationships as leverage; threatening to resign or cause disruption unless they get their way.

Unfortunately, these situations are very hard to fix. Bullies often stay in power because no one is willing to take on the kind of conflict necessary to effect change. However, it's your responsibility to speak up if you have a bully on your board. You're most likely going to lose good board directors and staff otherwise. Engage board leadership, who should address the behavior directly and as early as possible, speaking to what conduct is and isn't acceptable. (Hopefully you have a written code of conduct that you can point to. If not, check out Chapter 16.) Do so both verbally and in writing. Document dates, who said what and in what context, and who witnessed it. This move protects the organization and ensures the pattern is visible if the board eventually needs to act. Fire the director if the behavior continues. We have a zero-tolerance policy when it comes to bullies. No single board director's presence is worth damaging your team, your culture, and ultimately your organization.

