



**HELP SHEET 1**

**Characteristics of a dysfunctional board and HOW TO AVOID THEM**

**1. Board meetings are unspeakably boring and/or interminably long.**

Probably the number one reason for a Board's ineffectiveness, this problem is usually caused by a poor meeting structure and lack of discipline.

**Remedies:**

- Ensure agendas are brief, relevant, logically presented and distributed well before the meetings. Try allocating set times for items to be discussed and start meetings on time.
- Ensure all Board members know the meeting rules and are committed to following them and set time limits for individual speakers to avoid rambling Board members.
- If the chair is unable to keep order or keep the meeting on track, consider training.

**2. Board members are unclear about their responsibilities.**

It is frighteningly common for people to begin their role as a Board member without being clear of their roles and responsibilities this is not only legally dangerous but is almost sure to impede the effectiveness of the Board.

**Remedies:**

- Fully brief all new Board members about the contribution and commitment required of them and give them a written job description.
- Establish an induction process for all new Board members.
- Carry out annual training sessions for the board.

**3. Board Members don't take their role seriously.**

This is a similar problem to Number 2 above, but a more difficult one to tackle as it involves dealing with attitudes, rather than a mere lack of information. There is an alarming tendency for some not-for-profit board members to take their roles less seriously than they would a company board position – despite the fact that the legal requirements for each are identical.

**Remedies:**

- Ensure that all new and existing board members are aware of their roles and responsibilities, particularly when it comes to financial and legal obligations. Our Community's handbook – **Surviving and Thriving as a Safe, Effective Board Member** - is a good place to start.
- Pay for Board members to attend an outside training course on Board responsibilities, or put in place your own training session.



## HELP SHEET 2

4. **Board meetings are enjoyable but decisions are rarely made; things are always being deferred.**

This problem can be caused by a number of factors, including structural and operational deficiencies.

**Remedies:**

- Ensure that the Board is being provided with enough information before and during meetings to allow it to make a thoughtful decision.
- Think about the Board's size and structure and whether it may be too big and ungainly to be effective.
- Examine the conduct of your Board meetings to see if improvements need to be made.
- Ensure the Board's mission and vision are regularly reviewed so members are focused on the future direction of the organisations

5. **Decisions are made but they aren't followed through/implemented**

Again, there could be structural and operational problems at play here.

**Remedies:**

- Review the Board's committees and sub-committees. Do they meet regularly? Are their meetings conducted efficiently? Are committee members committed to their roles? Are they led by an effective committee chair? Is everyone aware of his or her responsibilities?
- Ensure that tasks are assigned and that minutes record to whom all tasks have been assigned. Follow up on the progress of assigned tasks during every regular meeting.

6. **The Board's decisions are inconsistent.**

Boards are often accused of being inconsistent in their decision-making, approving one course of action one month and rejecting a similar proposal the next. This can lead to uncertainty and frustration among the community group's staff, members and other stakeholders.

**Remedies:**

- Ensure all Board members are conversant with and committed to the mission and vision of the community group, as well as its long and short-term goals.
- Ensure the Board has developed a range of well-articulated, clearly understood policies to guide Board members in their conduct and decision-making. Policies could cover issues such as ethics and conduct, volunteer management, financial management, accountability, and so on.



**HELP SHEET 3**

**7. Board members do not get along; conflicts are common.**

Some conflict within a Board is not only inevitable but it is actually desirable – the most effective Boards are those that invite differences of opinion. However, too much conflict can become a destructive force in a Board.

**Remedies:**

- Consider the root cause of the conflict and try to treat that – for example, does one part feel others are not pulling their weight? Does someone feel they are not being listened to? Is there a personality clash?
- Consider holding a retreat or social event to allow Board members to interact outside the pressures of the boardroom environment. Talk about the need for all members to focus on the organisation's overall mission, rather than the interests of the individuals.

**8. The Board is dominated by a clique.**

While it is common for similar-minded individuals to join forces on particular issues, it can become quite damaging to the Board dynamics if the remaining members are consistently having their opinions overruled. Constantly defeated Board members are likely to lose interest in their role and conflicts could result.

**Remedies:**

- The Chair must take the lead in ensuring that all members' opinions are heard during debated and that all members are given an equal vote. Of course, if one group has the numbers, they will always win the vote; that's democracy.
- Think about putting in place sub-committees to deal with specific issues so that the power structures of the full Board can be diluted, or at least shared.