



The 4 Deadly Sins of Dysfunctional Boards — and How to Fix Them

By Joan Garry

Too often board members don't know they have a very important job because we don't tell them upfront. As nonprofit leaders, we don't define success, and we don't give trustees the tools they need to be successful. I have seen four key drivers of board dysfunction.

The Sin of Fear

Anxiety as a key driver of decision making by boards will never propel an organization forward in the pursuit of its mission. Fear will eat innovation for lunch.

A risk-averse board operates from a place of scarcity, not abundance. Because the board member joined not being 100 percent clear on the responsibilities — and was even less clear on the wonderful opportunities board service presents to them personally and professionally — fear can be an easy default.

The Sin of Penny-Pinching

A corollary to fear is frugality. Boards are notoriously frugal. Given the choice between raising money to try something new and cutting expenses to make room for a new activity, boards will vote for the latter far too often.

Skeptics will say this is true because board members know they are responsible for raising money and they don't want to embrace that role, so reducing expenses is much preferred.

The Sin of Cluelessness

There are two root causes here. First, most board members just don't know what they don't know. Second, they often lack a sense of the "whole." When the board does not act as a team with a shared sense of purpose, then the treasurer will only take care of the numbers, the nominations chair will just be responsible for identifying prospects, and so on.

The Worst Sin of All — Abuse of Power

When either the CEO or a board member loses complete sight of the reason for the work, and their primary motivation is self-interest, all hell can break loose. You would think that a sector rooted in altruism would not have this at play. It turns out that no organization, public or private, is exempt from this toxicity.

How to Foster Functional Boards

We must be clear about why boards matter — to prospects and to the folks around our conference table (real or virtual). Can you imagine if we made a board member feel like a million bucks, gave that person a real sense of privilege about board service? If you want a high-performing board, make sure the members know the following:

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- A nonprofit board bears little resemblance to a corporate board; it is the legal and governing entity of the organization.
- A board is the ultimate steward of the public funds that drive the work. Nonprofit boards should be passionate about and intimately familiar with the organization's mission and knowledgeable about the sector and its challenges and opportunities.
- A nonprofit board interviews, selects, hires, and evaluates the executive director. It develops a strategic plan in partnership with staff. Board members stand as the organization's most visible and credible ambassadors, inviting people to know more, do more, and give more to a nonprofit they care deeply about.
- A nonprofit board partners with staff to set a vision and to ensure that every donor can be very proud of the contribution she has made to support the work. A nonprofit board does not follow; it leads.
- A board member's compensation comes in the gift of service, which is a contribution of time, treasure, and expertise. Compensation also comes in the form of professional and leadership development and relationships with kindred spirits who share a passion for the organization's mission, relationships that can and do last for decades.

This article was adapted from the new book “[Joan Garry's Guide to Nonprofit Leadership](#).”