BULLIES on the Board

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Leslie (name changed to protect his identity) was the kind of director any Board would be delighted to have as a member. He came prepared for every meeting. He took up jobs that fit with his specific skills and experience as an accountant. He worked well with staff and other directors. Other directors, that is, except for one - the Board Chairman. No matter what Leslie did the Chairman never acknowledged his efforts and often said publicly and with surprising meanness that Leslie should have done the work differently. Leslie put up with this for many months, sure that if he just tried harder things would change. The straw that broke the proverbial camel's back happened when the Chairman refused Leslie's request to add an agenda item to a Board meeting. The outcome? Leslie joined several others before him and left the Board. This association is suffering a Bully on the Board.

Psychologists define bullying as a negative power relationship carried on by one individual or a group of individuals toward another person. Bullying does not necessarily need to be brutal or involve physical violence. Rumours, threats or hurtful words are also a type of bullying. The fact is that bullying occurs everywhere to all kinds of people where a culture of respect and kindness is missing. In situations where `no one is watching' or `no one will stand out and stand up", bullying is most prevalent. The notion that bullying only happens to a few people on poorly supervised schoolyards or in abusive family situations no longer holds true. Bullying is found where there are people with a propensity to be abusive, wherever there are victims who will allow bullying, and wherever there are situations within which bullying is condoned. Both family violence and bullying find their roots in societal attitudes and environmental conditioning. Both reflect the complexity of changing learned attitudes and behaviours and our collective reluctance to confront the issues when they arise. Both forms of violence are unacceptable and destructive to social structures. They are driven by the psychological dynamics of power and control.

One social structure which is as closed a unit as schools and families is a Board of Directors. There are subtle similarities in all bullying situations, from the hurt of the victim to the effects on the bully and the bystanders. This shouldn’t be too surprising. After all, we don’t change our personalities, the basic ways we interact with people when we join a Board – why wouldn’t there be bullies on Boards the same as in any other group of people? There are three reasons that Boards area a great place for bullies to fester: it’s a closed unit; the rules of the Board are often implicit rather than explicit, and power is part of the attraction. Each one of these reasons can lead to three bullying patterns: personal, positional and situational.

Personal

It is interesting to note that the people who have a tendency to bully are also those who are
leaders – those same leaders that we want and need on our Boards. The qualities of initiative, strong personality and perseverance can be found in both a bully and in a strong leader. Leaders often ignore the feelings of other people as they concentrate on the tasks. This ability to objectify the activity is a good thing for leaders but can lend itself to 'depersonalizing' the needs of the person. More often than we admit, people come to Boards in order to satisfy some lack in their work or personal life. For these directors, a Board can be a source of personal satisfaction that is attained through the power they hold. In workplace situations, the bully chooses a strong person to bully compared to other situations where the bullied is a weak person.

**Positional**

Positions like those of offices of Chairperson, Treasurer and even Secretary can lend themselves to being abusive. Since the officers in an organization are often the keepers of information, this can provide a source of power and this power can be abused. Holding onto information that belongs to all directors can be a form of bullying. The Treasurer who withholds the details about financial transactions, the Secretary who refuses to include or exclude certain information in the record of the meetings, and the Chairperson who holds tight to the agenda are all examples of officers who are abusing their positions and may bully others who would question their control.

**Situational**

Boards are a special kind of community where individuals find their places according to explicit or implicit set of rules. All organizations and their Boards have a culture through which their actions and behaviours are acted out. Each Board will have a culture that is customized to what it needs to do and how. Most often a Board culture is open and healthy but sometimes it is not. When a Board culture turns toxic, the environment can foster bullying. Sometimes there is such a long tradition of poor Director relations that only an observer or a new director can see the problems.

As in other potentially abusive situations, the problems and solutions belong to all of us.

All Directors need to watch their Boards for the following:

- How information is kept and shared and by whom.
- An unhealthy Board culture that condones abusive power and control.
- Bringing Directors onto a Board who will not match with the culture.

If we want to bully-proof our Boards, we need to ensure:

- Open information sharing with well-written and complete policies including job descriptions and codes of conduct for individual members of the Board, the Board as a whole, and for the officers.
- An honest, objective and regular audit of your Board's interactions and operations.
- A solid nomination and election process with an assessment by the Board of who would fit your Board culture and who would not.

It is awful to think that the schoolyard memories of bullying are still alive for some Directors like Leslie. Maybe we should apply the remedy that is suggested to children who are bullied. Face the bully with "head up, shoulders back, hands at your side, big voice" rather than let Directors, staff and other volunteers leave when faced with a bully.

Work hard at not having any bullying at your Board table. Good Boards need the Leslie's and sure don't need the bullies. Bullying hurts too many people and ultimately the whole association.