F12: Managing Bad Board Behavior for the Good of Your Land Trust

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ROOM 705

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The land trust executive director was shocked the first time she read an email from one of her board members calling her “stupid”—and even more shocked to see that it had been sent to her staff and the rest of the board. Certainly grown-ups don’t talk to each other this way, she thought as she waited for the board chair to speak up against this childish behavior. But the only response was silence. Next time it didn’t seem nearly as childish when the same board member lobbied a subgroup of the board to overturn a decision the full board had just made on her recommendation. As the rest of the board continued to remain silent, her feelings of unease and vulnerability increased. This behavior continued with the board member trying to direct her staff, excluding her from important email chains and making negative comments about her to partner organizations. When this board member lobbied to reverse the executive director’s board-approved pay increase, it was the last straw. With no support from her board chair, she felt like her only recourse was to step down. The board “bully” won the day and the land trust lost an effective leader.

BULLIES in Our Midst
Tips for ending harmful behaviors in the boardroom
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gen you hear the word “bully” you might picture a big kid shaking down a small fry on the playground for his lunch money. But as the real example in the introduction shows, bullying is happening in land trust boardrooms. Board bullying can create high levels of stress for personnel and damage the effectiveness, reputation and sustainability of the organization.

Most people who join a land trust board do so to make a difference and to improve their community, not to engage in confrontation. When someone’s behavior on the board crosses the line into bullying, others may turn a blind eye and hope the person or behavior goes away. It adds another layer of complication if the bully is a source (directly or indirectly) of substantial funding for the organization. But board members have a duty to the land trust to intervene, however difficult it is, before the bullying really hurts the organization.

This article will help board members and staff 1) recognize bullying when it happens at their land trust; 2) know that if they are the target they are not alone and it probably is not about them; and 3) get tips for how to end this toxic behavior.

Start the Dialogue
As a program manager for the Land Trust Alliance, I work with land trust board and staff members across seven states in the West and interact with executive directors from across the country. Alarmingly, my colleagues and I are hearing more and more stories about executive directors, all women, struggling with board members, all male, who treat them belligerently, disrespectfully or condescendingly. We brought some of these leaders together to share their stories and found how helpful it was for them to learn that they were not alone in these experiences.

We realized that one powerful way to end bullying is to expose it, so I started asking these brave women to share their stories so that we could work together to put an end to board bullying. It is a testament to just how devastating this behavior can be in a professional setting that two people felt like they had post-traumatic stress disorder from the experience—the act of talking about it months later was still traumatic for them—and several people declined to share their stories, even anonymously, for fear of reprisals. One victim of bullying suffered a year of serious physical maladies until the offending board member was removed, at which time her health improved dramatically. Sadly, in the mere six months since I started this exploration, I know of at least five executive directors who have left their positions as a direct result of bullying. It is possible that

REAL LIFE STORIES of board bullying in the land trust world:

• A male board member, in front of the whole board, told the land trust’s all female staff that they are getting out of shape and look terrible.
• A board chair disagreed with the executive director on a technical aspect of a land transaction and told the board she didn’t know what she was talking about and should not be listened to.
• A founding board member abused his power within the organization, taking advantage of access to the trust’s preserves and other “perks.” When questioned about these he responded with name-calling, copying people outside the organization and making false accusations.
• A male board member patronized female staff, demanding to know what they did and where they went while on vacation and withholding support for increased compensation based upon a false assumption he created.
• Whenever he thought that staff had made a mistake, one volatile board member would call the executive director, shouting loudly that she should fire someone. These grievances usually were unfounded. He demoralized staff by trying to micromanage them and trying to force the executive director to punish them.
• An executive director recruited a young, well-connected rancher to attend a board meeting to consider whether to join the very homogenous land trust board. The potential director was so appalled by the board’s “hostile” treatment of the executive director that he not only declined to join but spread the word in his community that the board was dysfunctional, thus hurting its future chances of recruiting others from that sphere.
• One executive director was so intimidated by an older male board member who would appear at the office unannounced to berate her for various actions that she was only comfortable working from home.

In none of these situations did another board member stand up against the bully and for the staff. In a few situations other board members expressed dismay to the staff about the behavior but did not intervene. If this happened on your board, what would you do?
board members have also left rather than continue to watch, or be subjected to, this behavior.

**Call it What it Is**
The first step in combatting bullying is seeing it for what it is. Someone who disagrees with others and states his or her opinion forcefully, while still following board rules of communication and decision-making, is not a bully—he or she is a dissenter and dissent can be healthy for any organization. What is not healthy or acceptable is behavior that yields inequitable power in a way that harms others emotionally, reputationally or even physically.

There are two important components to bullying that should be recognized. The first is that bullies make personal attacks—they cross the line from questioning or disagreeing with an idea, action or policy and attack a person. For example, it is quite different to disagree with a proposed acquisition based on the merits of the deal than to attack the champion of that deal. “This property is too expensive for our land trust” is a very different argument than “It is stupid of you to want to buy this land because you don’t understand basic financial management.” Second, bullies will often question or attack someone’s motives rather than sticking to facts: “You only want to cancel this land trust event because you’re lazy.”

Bullying might happen as
- internal board interactions,
- board to staff interactions (either to the executive or around the executive director to other staff),
- board self-dealing or
- sexual harassment.

It could look like
- A board member who dominates every conversation,
- Someone who expresses his or her opinions so aggressively that others are afraid to disagree,
- Manipulation of others by domineering, lying, shaming or other negative behaviors,
- Using organizational rules to get their way (such as cutting off discussion),
- A flaunting of organizational rules or
- Cyber-bullying through email communications.

**Address It—Now**
As a board member it is your responsibility to stop bullying behavior and then to remove the offending board member if that person’s behavior does not change. Otherwise you are allowing him or her to negatively impact the land trust’s effectiveness and shirking your fiduciary duty to the organization and its long-term sustainability.

Proactively prevent bullying:
1. Set clear expectations for the organization on how board members and staff will interact.
   - Adopt an organizational code of ethics that outlines acceptable and unacceptable interactions (acceptable could include: focus on the issue not the person, assume good intentions, accept statements at face value and listen constructively).
   - Provide written job descriptions for board members to sign that make it clear how they should interact with staff and each other.
   - Consider whether your land trust could benefit from training on constructive disagreement and honoring diversity of opinions.
   - Have experienced board members model appropriate interactions with staff.
2. Recruit and train well:
   - Provide clear and consistent orientation for new board members.
   - Engage in a yearly board evaluation process that identifies negative behaviors.

When bullying happens you should act as follows:
- Speak up the first time you see it with an unambiguous comment like “That is not how we interact on this board” or “Let’s focus our comments on the issues.” The longer the behavior goes unaddressed, the harder it will be to stop it.
- Enlist your board chair’s help (as an executive director or board member). The chair should take the offending board member aside and firmly insist the behavior stops.
- Consider bringing in a facilitator to help the board model appropriate modes of communication that are healthy for everyone in the organization.
- If there is no change in the bullying behavior, fire the board member. No board member should be allowed to treat others in the organization this way and it must be made clear that this behavior will not be tolerated.

A land trust board that honors diversity, such as different opinions, values, aesthetics, backgrounds and experiences, with courtesy only makes the organization stronger. Don’t let a bully poison the well for everyone else.

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