

[Nonprofit Hearts](#)

3. Firing a Board member with grace

There's an assumption in much of the nonprofit world that says you can't fire a Board member because it's not nice or it's not allowed or it's just not done.

But it matters that nonprofits always retain the right to fire a Board member because...

No one is above mission discipline.

And no one should operate outside it, most especially top decision makers like Board members.

I know EDs can feel intimidated by the fact that the Board has the ultimate legal authority in a nonprofit, and by the VIP status of some of their Board members. But...

The discipline of the mission trumps everything else.

It gives you the right to take a stand for the health and the future of your organization.

And if a Board member is acting capriciously or acting out or acting only in service of his own ego, then it's time to set limits. Because if you don't then you're saying, "It's okay for Board members to hurt this nonprofit."

For example, if we give the message that a bully is untouchable because he's been elected to a term, we're saying Board members have a special kind of entitlement. We're saying...

We believe in Board entitlement more than we believe in our mission. We'll allow poison gossip, personal attacks, and relational aggression to take priority over our mission.

What this means is that we're sacrificing our mission in order to grant a special personal indulgence to a few people, sometimes only one person, who, in the final touch of irony, no one even likes or respects.

When it comes to mission discipline we want Board members to be exemplary not exempt.

We need the Boards of our social change nonprofits to be filled with people who are super responsible not irresponsible.

The last thing we need to do is enable irresponsibility.

Of course the idea of firing a Board member, no matter how justified the case, might seem very challenging. It might seem impossible.

What can make it very possible and not so challenging is the right context.

If you do rigorous, thoughtful recruitment,

If you negotiate a very clear upfront contract with each Board member about the contribution they're going to make to your work, and

If you have a strong Board culture based on mission discipline, **then firing a Board member who is out of alignment is not surprising or shocking. It becomes a matter of fact.**

Let me be clear that when I say "out of alignment" I'm not talking about ordinary disagreements about strategy. We don't want a Board that marches in lock step with no one questioning anything. We want a Board that engages in vigorous debate. We want people who will think deeply and who will take the time to work through decisions with care.

But then when the Board makes a decision based on mission, we want all the members to get on the team and go with the plan, rather than sabotaging or sniping or doing anything that drags down the morale and effectiveness of the Board.

A sweet firing

From my days at CAP, I remember a Board member, Everett, who was a top executive at one of the biggest companies in our city. He dutifully came to every Board meeting, but he seemed restless and distracted. After four months of this, Kate and I caught him after a meeting and she said to him...

"I wanted to check in with you, because I'm getting the feeling that these meetings aren't working for you. It just seems like you don't really want to be here."

Everett sighed and said, "I'm sorry, but that's true. I've got so much going on at work, I have too many meetings in my life, and I don't feel like I'm making a contribution here."

Kate responded, "Okay, as of now you're no longer a Board member. Relax and let it go. But we love you and we still want you to be part of our CAP family. We'd still like to keep in touch. Does that work for you and would it be okay for us to call you with questions from time to time?"

He broke into a big smile and said, "Yes, that does work for me. And thanks for talking with me, I feel so relieved. I've been feeling all kinds of guilty about not being a good Board member. I really like CAP a lot. Definitely call me."

And we did call him and he was very helpful to us, but in his way. Meetings drove him crazy, however a ten-minute phone call where he could help us with advice or give us something—like the use of his fabulous conference room at the top of his building looking out over the Bay Area—that he enjoyed.

This is an illustration of how important it is to keep thinking about your Board members as people rather than as your bosses.

A serious firing

Now let's take a look at a tougher situation. Here Diana is the ED and Josie is the Board President:

Diana: Hi, Henry. Josie and I asked to have this meeting with you today because we're going to ask you to leave our Board.

Henry: What?! That's a bolt out of the blue.

Josie: Really?

Henry: Yeh.

Josie: I'm surprised to hear that since we've already had two conversations with you about how you treat other Board members during the meetings and how you talk to them in the phone calls you make between meetings.

Henry: Well, sure we've talked, but I had no idea you were serious.

Josie: We are so very serious. Our job is to protect the mission and the future of this organization. Two of our best Board members have told us they've been thinking about quitting because of you. We won't let that happen. Absolutely not.

Henry: Well, let's talk this through.

Josie: We're not going to talk about this decision. It's been made and it's not going to be unmade. I've talked with the other Board members and I have their full support. As far as you and this organization go, it's over.

So we can take care of this now, quietly, or we can take it to the Board for a public vote.

Henry: But...

Josie: Just a second, Diana has something to say to you first.

Diana: Even though we're asking you to leave, we get it that you mean well. We get it that you care about the mission.

Henry: So...

Diana: No, please wait. Please hear me out. This is what's in my heart to say to you and I really want to say it. You've told me probably a dozen times in the six months you've been here how much you enjoy being the devil's advocate. And from watching you in meetings, I can see that you really mean it.

And you know, there is actually a need in the nonprofit sector for devil's advocates. Sometimes we make decisions too quickly. We're doing too much so we move too fast on big strategic decisions and that can hurt us. Or we miss the big opportunities because we don't think deeply enough.

Henry: Well, yes that's why I...

Diana: Please, Henry. I've heard you out many times. Let me take my turn so I can get to the important part. You definitely have a talent for playing devil's advocate, and that's something that can be used constructively.

But on our Board you've coupled it with attack. Five of our Board members have told me they feel attacked whenever they put out a new idea, so they've stopped putting out ideas.

Henry: Well, they shouldn't stop.

Diana: But they are stopping and that's terrible for the future of our nonprofit. So here's what I want to say to you. I want to urge you to figure out how to put your talent to use in a way that connects you with people so they'll appreciate you.

If you could learn to critique strategies as a friendly devil's advocate instead of as an attacker, think how useful you could be to lots of organizations. You could offer yourself as a go-to person when a nonprofit needs to test out their thinking.

Henry: Jeez, I never saw it that way before. I'm going to stay here and learn how to do that.

Josie: No, you're not. It's over between you and this organization, Henry. But it's not over for you. In fact, if you handle that attacking thing, a new phase of your life might just be beginning. And that's what I hope for you.

If we let you stay here, we'd lose Board members and we'd resent you something terrible. And that's not who we are. We don't do resentment. We won't let that happen to us and we won't let it happen to you.

Diana: Our hope is that you'll find your niche. That you'll turn your talent into a gift.

Henry: Well, this is a shock.

Josie: I understand. And I hope that whatever else you take away from this conversation, you'll take this: We're doing our level best to be your advocates right now.

Henry: My advocates?! Doesn't feel like it when you're kicking me out.

Diana: But think about how we're talking with you as we're kicking you out. We haven't once put you down. We haven't attacked you. We could have just told you to get out. But we're taking the time to have a more challenging conversation. Challenging for you and for us. Because we see the possibility of a great future for you as a volunteer in the nonprofit sector.

You do have a gift. You're really smart and sharp and able to understand very complex problems. If you could learn to give that gift without hurting people, you'd be golden. We really mean it. We want the best for you.

Henry: It doesn't feel too good.

Josie: No, I imagine it doesn't. But this is just the first step on a journey that we hope will be a blessing for you. That's our wish for you. And now we're done.

Henry: Well, if you don't want me around then I don't want to be part of this.

Diana: Will you think about what we said about using the talent you have for complex analysis? In fact, let me ask you to play devil's advocate for a moment. What's wrong with that idea?

Henry: Well...er....humpf. Actually I can't think of anything wrong with it. It's not such a bad idea.

Diana: Coming from you that's high praise!

Henry: It is? Am I really that bad?

Diana: Henry, you are so good, so good at what you do. It's just the attack thing that gets in the way. That's all.

Henry: Oh. Well. I guess this gives me a lot to think about.

Josie: You know what? I wasn't going to offer this, but after you've done some thinking, if you want to call me and brainstorm where you could make the biggest difference for nonprofits, I'd be glad to talk with you.

Henry: You're kicking me out, but you want to brainstorm with me?

Josie: Exactly. I don't see any contradiction. I'm a half-fan of yours, Henry.

Henry: What's that?

Josie: I'm a fan of your talent, but not of your style.

Henry: Okay, I'll tell you what. I'll take your offer. I'm out of here, but I'll call you in a month, Josie. I'll hold you to it.

Josie: I believe you. And I'll welcome your call.

Henry: Truth is I don't have fans. So I guess half a fan is something I'll go for.

Let me emphasize the context again. Notice in this situation, the ED and Board President were in alignment. They knew they had the backing of the Board, so they were not intimidated. They could **set limits** on Henry and **be his advocate** at the same time.

If this was one of those situations where the majority of the Board members were acting out, this conversation probably wouldn't have happened. So having a culture of mission discipline really matters.

One other thing, when Josie offered brainstorming, she wasn't rescuing or making nice. She saw an opening with Henry and she wanted to take it. She knows that if he does not treat her with respect when he calls, she's quite capable of setting limits and ending the call on the spot.

Term limits vs. setting limits

The other day, I heard a consultant say...

"You have to have term limits, because that's the only way you can get rid of difficult Board members."

I've heard that argument many times, that term limits are the only way to get rid of "dead wood" or to "clean house."

This strikes me as another rule that sounds good at first, but not if you think it through.

If you have a mission-based reason for term limits, then by all means have them.

Say the mission of your nonprofit is to build grassroots democracy in your community. You want lots of people to cycle through the Board over the years so you can build a depth of leadership in the community. So term limits really work for you.

But if you set up term limits just because you don't want to ever have to have a forthright conversation with a Board member about his behavior, that's not such a good reason, because...

Then you're instituting term limits out of fear rather than as a positive policy.

And think about this...

Can you tolerate a destructive bully on your Board for three years until his term runs out?

And what if your bylaws say he can have another term? You're still going to have to have a conversation with him about why you won't vote him back in for a second three years, or else you're going to have to put up with him for a total of six years.

Six years of suffering because it's scary to have one conversation where you take a stand and enforce mission discipline.

And one more thing. I know of people who have been on Boards for ten, twenty, and even thirty years, where the organizations love them and would hate, hate, hate to lose them.

Say you've got Serena on your Board for 30 years. But she's a pleasure to work with. She believes in mission discipline. She knows all the top national people in your field and they hold her in the highest esteem.

She's the most articulate spokesperson you've ever had and a great mentor, helping to build new leadership.

It means the world to her to be on the Board of this organization which she has loved and been part of since before some of the staff were even born.

Why would you ever want to term her out? You can bring in new blood. Nothing's stopping you from doing that. But here's one of the most amazing Board members you could ever ask for. She's helping you not hurting you.

Why would you let go of a Board member like this so you could have term limits just so if you ever got a bully on your Board you would not have to have a direct conversation with him but could just wait him out?

If we substitute term limits for setting limits, what this means is that we're willing to sacrifice a great Board member so we can be passive. But here's something I know about social change leaders...

Passive is not us. It's just not. We're activists.

We don't believe in sitting around watching things go wrong. We don't believe in sacrificing good people. We just stone-cold don't believe in that.

Think about the irony. Here we are going out into the world to change it. We're taking on some of the biggest issues there are. And some of the most powerful people and institutions there are. Meanwhile back in the office, we can't stop garden variety acting out on our Board?

How good can we feel about ourselves if we are submitting to internal bullies who are hurting the work we love?

Changing the way power works in our society is a long-term enterprise. So it would make sense that some, if not many

of our organizations would want to build long-term teams rather than having continuous turnover on the Board.

I want to be clear that I understand the reluctance to confront a Board member. I understand the fear. But please remember, **setting limits on a Board member, which is challenging in the moment, is actually easier than enduring years of disrespect and mistreatment.**

And it seems to me that it's important for our communities to be able to see what a truly happy and effective organization looks like and feels like and what it takes to make greatness happen. I think that's part of our leadership. If all that our communities ever see are dysfunctional, sacrificial organizations, wouldn't that get depressing?

But if they see even one truly great organization, where people really practice what they preach, what might that inspire?

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