

# Building better boards

Julie Garland McLellan



We all know that boards should be high performing teams and sometimes we try to build such a team from the individuals around our boardroom table. In the face of failure we may claim that a high performing team can't be built from underpaid amateurs. But it can.

If your board is not a team, understand the problem before

attempting a solution. Here are some common problems and ideas for fixing them:

1. **Committees in disguise:** A board that acts like a committee focuses on mitigating negative outcomes rather than on the best possible outcome. Counteract this behaviour with a compelling vision to motivate board members, and with education on effective performance.
2. **Nominees:** Board members that represent a powerful constituency, especially government or donor nominees, can restrict the association to activities that support the nominator rather than the association as a whole. Remind members of their responsibility to the whole board and, if necessary, exclude them from decisions where they have a conflict of interest. Balance this by asking conflicted members to provide information on the nominator's issues so that these can be incorporated into the decision-making of unconflicted board members.



3. **Single interest members:** These members focus only on the events and issues that interest them and ignore all the rest. If you have people who only want to organise one aspect of the association, create a committee and put them on it. Then remove them from the board "so as not to take up their time with all that 'other stuff'". If they refuse to go insist on education as a pre-requisite for board membership. If necessary put it to a vote and change your constitution. It is amazing how people evaporate from the board when you insist they attend a short course on financial statements!

4. **Point scorers:** Some members prefer to score points and win arguments rather than have a quality discussion. Counteract this with a statement on how the board will address each other in meetings. Ban phrases that suppress debate and, if necessary, appoint a board member to invigilate your discussion and facilitate a debrief. ●

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