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Technology

Keeping Them in the Loop

When Owners Complain About the Lack of Communication or the Absence of Transparency, What Are They Really Complaining About?



Did you join your condo board because you felt like the corporation wasn't doing a good job communicating with the community? Maybe you felt like there were issues with how transparent the board was, or that the flow of information was slow and lacking. And I bet you felt like you could do a better job.

That was me.

Back then, the only times we were able to have open discourse with the board was at our AGM. Other communications were mostly just paper notices on our doors informing us of basic day-to-day activities like elevator maintenance, garage cleanings, and the like.

I joined my board because, as a young tech professional, I thought I could vastly improve the lines of communications between the board and our residents using all the technologies readily available for open real-time discussions - like websites, message forums, and even social media sites.

Oh how naive I was.

I didn't know at the time that the role of being a board director is nuanced. And, more often than not, technology was not the main factor slowing down communications.

It wasn't until I was deep into the thick of things did I understand that not all matters could be summed up in a nice little tidbit, not every issue needed to be disclosed to all owners, and that decisions made at the board table were carefully decided and took time to make. I also didn't anticipate how much of my free time that I would devote to the role, how complex the issues were, and how much time I would need to devote to maintaining open lines of communications.

Transparency: it's more than meets the eye

When owners complain about the lack of communication or the absence of transparency, what are they really complaining about? More often than not, what they

really want is open, two-way, and real-time communication directly with board members. The rapid advancements in technology have generated a culture shift of impatience when it comes to response times for emails or messages. When owners send an email addressed to the board they are expecting a response either the same day or next. However, there are challenges that prevent rapid communication, most notably real-time discussions. Every matter has a technical and nontechnical side which complicates the way it is communicated.

On the technical side, as a director you are part of a team that is responsible for making major decisions for how the condo corporation is run, ensuring that the corporation abides by the Condo Act, and enforcing the condo's rules, bylaws and declaration. Collectively a condo board wants to make the very best decisions that will ultimately benefit the corporation and all owners, and the board must discuss and approve all communications before they go out. As a director, your singular voice

ILLUSTRATION BY MAURICE VELLEKOOP

cannot represent the board, especially if it conflicts with the majority of the board members. Doing so could expose you to personal liability. Because of this, responses from the board can take days or weeks, especially if it requires significant discussion to reach a consensus.

The non-technical side is the human part of the role. Personally, we fear the potential for backlash when tough decisions are made particularly in cases where a special assessment needs to be levied. Despite your best efforts you won't be able

to please everyone. Criticism is part of the job, but let's be honest, it doesn't feel good to hear complaints from owners especially if you have been working hard and putting in long hours for a volunteer position no one else wanted to take.

You can't really blame directors for not wanting owners to have direct open lines to them. It can be particularly difficult when negative feedback is concentrated with a minority of owners that may have their own agenda, or a grudge against the property manager or directors. These

owners will eviscerate the board over any perceived mistake, no matter how small. So boards become extra careful when it comes to sharing information. Regardless of what the issue is, this vocal minority can clog up the email inboxes with their various complaints or derail an owners' meeting with their grievances. Most people wouldn't want to deal with that, which is why it's so hard to get condo directors to run for election in the first place.

So what's the solution?

Owners want to feel like they are in the know about all the important happenings in the condo. And they want to feel like they are able to take part in the direction of their investment, even if they may not do it all the time. But it needs to be done in a way that allows the board to take the required time to discuss issues before they're communicated to their owners.

The solution is fairly simple to implement, but does require a commitment to the process. There are three parts to the process, all of which I believe are necessary:

1. Send out a Monthly Newsletter

This newsletter can provide a quick summary of business covered by the board, topics discussed, and any upcoming work or maintenance happening at the condo. This monthly check-in with owners is just the right amount of contact so that owners can remain informed without clogging their inboxes with news. This will allow you to easily communicate pertinent information to owners on a regular basis which results in the feeling of increased transparency.

TIP: An easy way to create your newsletter is to summarize the minutes of the monthly board meeting into high-level topics to ensure that no confidential information is present. There are even minute taking services that will create a newsletter for you based on the minutes they create.

2. Have a board suggestion inbox

Create a separate email address so that owners can send feedback, suggestions, and comments. Ensure that this inbox can only be accessed by directors and make sure your community knows that the property manager cannot access it. Oftentimes when owners have complaints

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about proper communication, their fear is that the property manager will filter out the feedback before it gets to the board – especially true if the complaint is about the property manager.

Make sure you set expectations for owners as to how this email is to be used. The suggestion box is not to be used for urgent real-time matters, but rather to collect issues to be discussed by the directors at a future board meeting. By creating this separation, the corporation doesn't have to devote endless hours to monitoring and responding to each message that comes into the inbox. The board can set aside time at each meeting to review issues identified by owners. Responses to suggestions can be collectively drafted at the board meeting, and if the topics are general enough, to publish responses in the monthly newsletters.

TIP: To ensure that owners know that this email is only a suggestion box, setup an autoresponder with a message like "Your comment has been received and will be reviewed at the next board meeting. For urgent matters, contact the manager at"

3. Have a website

In order for the suggestions above to be effective, owners need to be able to easily find the email inbox and read the newsletters. You can post them in a common area bulletin board, but the best way to do this is online with a website. Your condo might already have a website, but if it doesn't then it doesn't have to be fancy. There are only two things the website needs to be effective – it should publish the email address of the suggestion box AND an archive of all the monthly newsletters. Being able to easily find the suggestion box and view the archive of newsletters shows that the board is active and committed to keeping communications open.

TIP: If your condo doesn't already have a website, then a blog website (like Wordpress.com) is a cheap and quick way to get started with this.

Lessons learned

My time as a director has given me a unique vantage point. As a director, I now see all the potential risks to the corpora-

tion when an issue arises. I learned that it isn't easy to quickly sum up a decision in a tidy little bullet point, especially if it is related to a major project for the corporation that had taken months of planning. The biggest lesson that I learned is that when the busyness of life takes over and things get overwhelming, it's good to be able to "disconnect" from the board for a while. There's no shame from taking a short break from the board every now and then. And, being able to recharge and take some time to gain some perspective makes you a better director that

can do more your condo community.

Maintaining a condominium is complex on its own, and the most difficult part is managing the relationships with owners. Opening lines of communications can be complicated, but doable. In the end it's not technically challenging as it doesn't require a lot of technology to make it work. Clearly setting expectations for response times, and use of readily available technology can maintain an ongoing flow of information thus improving transparency and contentment within your condo community. **CV**

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