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Condo Governance

Top 5 Tips for Boards When Dealing With Difficult People

Building Relationships Takes Time, and, Like Family, You Cannot Pick Your Neighbour

There are numerous ways in which we can attempt to define difficult people or place them into categories, such as whiners, bullies, tattletales, etc. In this article, we will address the top 5 approaches boards should implement in dealing with people with whom it is difficult to communicate.

The tricky part about dealing with difficult people in condominiums is that it is your shared home and community and you cannot just walk away without some sort of resolution or understanding, unlike a workplace or social setting. As a board member, you were elected to act in the best interest of the community and will inevitably displease some owners when making decisions.

A soundly based method to deal with difficult people is to remember the acronym – BASED (see what I did there). In short, the 5 things to remember are to Be open-minded, Assume positive intent, Stick to the facts, Engage in listening and treat everyone with Dignity and respect. It is easy to get caught up in drama and personal battles, but remember that there are practical ways of dealing with people on a human level. If you recognize that you may be one of these difficult people, then consider how you could develop a new approach for your next encounter and pos-

sibly have a pleasant outcome, regardless of the decision.

1. Be Open-Minded

This applies mostly when a board is being criticized for an action taken or a

communication approach. A board that has successfully worked together for a long period could get stuck in the rut of ‘that’s how we’ve always done it’ without considering there could be a better way. The board should also be mindful not to



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take criticism personally. Despite how the message from the difficult person is delivered, maintaining professionalism and staying calm will benefit all parties. Focus on what can be done, and leverage the talent in the community if it is something outside of the board's skillset. An easy example would be poster notice boards – commonly placed in the mail collection area of a condo – consider e-blasts, digital displays, websites etc – are you up to date with the technology available?

2. Assume Positive Intent

Related to open-mindedness, don't assume people are intentionally trying to cause trouble or throw a wrench into your plans. Perhaps this could be a time to reflect on how messaging was worded or distributed. Ask yourselves if communication was clear to someone outside of the decision-making group and if there was enough transparency to maintain trust from the community. This 'difficult' person may also be speaking on behalf of other residents who may be uncomfortable approaching the board directly. Just as the board must make decisions in the best interest of the community, the residents also want a well-managed place to call home. For example, where residents complain about increasing common element fees, the board may host an informal town hall to explain how funding is distributed.

3. Stick to the Facts

'Sticking to the facts' means refraining from hearsay or anecdotal evidence instead of actual facts, despite what the difficult person may present. It also includes not allowing the conversation to veer from the original item or go off on another tangent. Some people may feel they are being targeted or discriminated against for certain board decisions. This reinforces the earlier point of not taking things personally. Sticking to the facts will take the emotion out of it, eliminate the source bias and reinforce why a specific decision was made. A frequent example is rules (or by-laws) regarding pets, dogs specifically and particularly when enforcing the nuisance behaviour. This is a highly emotional issue for a resident and therefore important that the board be armed with documentation and facts and not anecdotal complaints from neighbours or the board members.

4. Engage in Listening

People need to know their voice is being heard and acknowledged. A simple nod or 'I understand' is sometimes not enough and could come off as flippant. This is not the time to be thinking of your response or defending actions taken. Acting defensively will escalate the issue and clearly show that you are not interested in listening to another perspective. This is an opportunity to listen for or suss out any hidden needs that have not been previously articulated. There may be times where there will be no solution, however a person needs to vent and will appreciate being heard. An example is when fire testing is required, equipment needs to be checked and loud alarms are regularly triggered – shift workers, people home with pets and or children do not appreciate the disturbance. Condominiums have fire code and safety requirements which must be met for the protection of all residents. However, reminding residents with more advanced notice so alternate arrangements can be made to vacate the premises for that day shows consideration of their situation but it's not going to stop the process.

5. Dignity and Respect

We are all human being with feelings and flaws, so treat others with dignity and respect. Regardless of the approach of the difficult person, always be polite and set the example of being calm to hopefully deflate any emotional or physical outbursts. Choose your battles wisely and always allow the other party an easy 'out' if they are feeling defeated. If it seems there is no reasoning with the person, it may be wise to hit 'pause' and regroup when clearer heads prevail. There is no rule that says a demand has

to be met or solved immediately. An example is an outburst from someone trying to highjack an AGM with personal opinions – the chair can defer a legitimate topic for the board's private discussion at a board meeting, not a public AGM forum, request the person remove themselves or call a short recess to take them aside and advise the behaviour will not be tolerated.

The board should also be mindful not to take criticism personally. Despite how the message from the difficult person is delivered, maintaining professionalism and staying calm will benefit all parties.

As a board member, you may find yourself as an easy target for people who may be having any sort of issue, whether it be personal, professional or with the community. Living in a condominium could be a difficult transition for some people and the extra time taken to provide transparent documentation and communication would result in a more engaged community.

Residents should realize that being elected to the board is a volunteer position that you have

undertaken to ensure the community is socially and financially responsible and that the board of directors are also human beings who deserve the same dignity and respect as everybody else.

Lastly, when being challenged by a difficult person, it is not always up to the board to solve everyone's problems. However, when it comes to the successful operation of the community, the board is responsible to make these decisions on behalf of the owners. It is easy to be an armchair critic and developing solutions can be done together in a meaningful way. When someone comes with an issue or complaint, ask them for a solution for the board's consideration. Building relationships takes time, and, like family, you cannot pick your neighbour, but you can make the decision to be excellent to each other. 