

The 4 Types of Power Players: How They Disrupt Boards and What to Do About Them



As any experienced organizational manager or leader will quickly affirm, getting any group of people to work together smoothly, even on a relatively simple task, can be hard. This is even more true in a boardroom, where tasks are rarely simple, and, ideally, members are coming from diverse backgrounds and perspectives.

With this in mind, it seems the cards are already stacked against a productive group dynamic. This is why conscientious nonprofit board leaders need to be constantly keeping a watchful eye out for disruption. And one of the first things they should to watch out for is what we can simply call a power player.

A power player is an individual who attempts, successfully or not, to assert undue influence, dominance, or control over the group. Because of the complexity of nonprofit governance, the nonprofit mission's ability to inspire passion, and the fact that board service is unpaid, a typical nonprofit board is a veritable petri dish for incubating power players who can disrupt collaboration and stymie organizational governance.

The good news is that all board members can take responsibility for identifying power plays while they are happening and act swiftly to protect and preserve collaboration and equity of participation. Awareness of four common types of dominance assertion is the first step.



The Dominator

These are the easiest to recognize. They are the people who speak the loudest and most often. We've all met dominators. They are

often quick to judge — whether it's because of actual knowledge or perhaps just an abundance of confidence in their own opinions.

But regardless of if their attempts at control come from a benevolent sense of responsibility or toxic narcissism, dominators prevent a healthy flow of diverse perspectives, especially when it comes to quieter, more introverted group members.



The Interrogator

These are harder to recognize. Interrogators are cousins of dominators, but they are sneakier about seeking power. While all board members need to ask questions, interrogators use questions to seek power, quizzing and probing other members or staff to disrupt or stall any initiative they don't like. One common interrogator strategy is creative obfuscation, in which they will sidetrack an initiative with confusing or shifting narratives and constant requests for more detail or evidence. Those with black belts in interrogation — who are plentiful in political arenas — may even “frame shift,” presenting a new and startling perspective to cast doubt on the entire enterprise. With doubt sown on other perspectives, they present their path as the only one that is safe and sound.

Another tried-and-true interrogator strategy is the orbital referral — a tongue-in-cheek label for shifting the discussion skyward, asking the big questions that can never really be answered with certainty. Interrogators deploying the orbital referral may seek to have nuanced, extensive discussions around, say, the organization's mission or values statements when that is not the purpose of the meeting. They pursue the seemingly important work of aligning the group on a grand purpose or design, but do so with no practical expression or operational implementation.



The Aloof

This third type of power player is common and easy to spot. The aloof are just that: hard to engage. They miss meetings; they are unresponsive to email. They don't have strong opinions and don't put a shoulder down to help with organizational development, fundraising, etc. They may have significant surface value by virtue of their talents, wealth, or influence, but they aren't really on the team. When executive directors or board chairs complain about “board engagement,” they are likely dealing with the aloof.

The aloof often have good reasons for their behavior. They may be “crazy busy” and even express regret at their lack of participation and responsiveness. If

confronted, they will often promise to do better in the future. But if their aloof behavior becomes a pattern, and they don't take the initiative and volunteer their resignation, then they are sending the group a clear message of, "I want to stay on this board for the prestige or because it makes me feel good, but I am not going to do much work, and I certainly am not going to raise money, engage in the analysis of complex matters, or offer my own opinion for potential criticism."



The Victim

The fourth type is perhaps the most difficult to resolve. The victim won't assume responsibility for making a decision or authentically engaging in a challenging group conversation because of, well, the "great difficulty of life." And there is always something terrible or onerous in the way, and certainly none of it is their fault.

Now, we hasten to say that there are obviously terrible and huge numbers of genuinely traumatized people who authentically are victims. We are not including them in this classification! We refer to the board members who, to varying degrees, adopt the pose or stance of a victim, presenting exaggerated or distracting matters as reasons for their failure to productively engage.

Dealing with victims is fraught with risk. Because consciously or not, the victim will take advantage of the kindness and sympathy of others.

So what should board members do about power players? Standing up to a dominator can be scary. Interrogators just might be asking very important questions. And is it reasonable to expect everyone to answer every email and attend every meeting? Finally, the potential of being an insensitive jerk or, worse, causing genuine additional harm on someone that may already be struggling to stay afloat, makes it very difficult to steer a victim toward a more productive style of group participation.

In a perfect world, there would be early, respectful-yet-firm intervention from the board chair with clear behavioral intervention and even offboarding if the power plays continue. But how often does this actually happen? And what if there are one or more power players on the executive committee itself (should it exist)?

There are no simple answers. Ultimately, every group dynamic is unique. In the words of Tolstoy, "All happy families are alike; all unhappy families are unhappy in their own way." So if your board is unhappy, and your organization has important work to do, diagnosing the source of dysfunction — and whether you have one of these power players — is a necessary first step.