



Due diligence is critical before inviting a person to become a member of your Board of Directors or Advisors. You should contact references and talk with others who know the person you are considering. Even so, a “bad apple” can sometimes slip through—and we all know that it only takes one to spoil the whole bunch. Here are eight board member types you need to avoid:

The Underminer. This is the kind of board member who rolls his eyes behind the CEO’s back, plays a game on his phone during a presentation or engages in other blatantly disrespectful behavior. When he does contribute to the discussion, the Underminer usually does so only to criticize or mock a suggestion.

The Attacker. The Attacker often engages in personal accusations, sometimes truly hostile ones, and seems to enjoy making the rest of the board uncomfortable. He might even badmouth the CEO in front of the board, as in “If only our CEO knew what he was doing!”

The Gossip. Other board members hesitate to share information with the Gossip, as it so often gets leaked. I know of one board member who deliberately told a senior management team member when their CEO was looking to retire, even though this had not yet been shared outside the board room. You can imagine the consequences of such a betrayal of confidence.

The Blabbermouth. A close cousin of the Gossip, the Blabbermouth cannot be trusted to honor confidentiality, whether his blabbing is malicious or just careless. In one situation, a Blabbermouth shared the compensation of the CEO of a privately held company with a member of the local community. This kind of board member simply disregards any potential consequences of their information sharing.

The Sidebar. A board member like this constantly engages in disruptive side conversations at the meeting table. I once heard a Sidebar discussing her upcoming European vacation while a senior manager was presenting to the full board! Sheer rudeness aside, this is hardly productive or collaborative behavior, and it needs to stop.

The Digresser. A Digresser can be relied upon to take a discussion completely off course before it even has a chance to be productive. At one meeting, the CEO was presenting a major strategic initiative to the board when the Digresser started talking about whether an air conditioning unit at one of the company factories had yet been repaired. People like this bring board meetings right into the weeds, and mire them there.

The Dominator. If you have seven board members, figure that each of them should have the floor about 15% of the time. When one member consistently takes more time than that, while others barely have an opportunity to speak, you have a Dominator on your hands. A Dominator loves the sound of his own voice, and will happily sacrifice an effective meeting for the sake of hearing more of it!

The Power-tripper. This person is all about the power and prestige of being a board member, but when it comes to the work, or the substance... not so much. He can be found strolling around corporate headquarters, telling management that “As a board member, I would suggest...” or “That’s an issue I will raise at the next board meeting...” or “I’m sure my fellow board members would agree that...” It is tiresome and embarrassing and over time, will earn the Power-tripper more ridicule than respect.

Simplifications aside, a troublesome board member can present a serious problem to your company. Other members who take their roles seriously and want to function in a collaborative, cooperative way will become frustrated. I have seen whole boards become dysfunctional because of one or two negative characters.

The good news is that once identified, this problem is easily fixed. As soon as possible, speak to your errant board member to clarify their role and responsibilities. Let them understand why their behavior is disruptive and damaging, and give them an opportunity to change their ways.