

# What's the best way to deal with a malcontent at the club?

## BOB

**“Keep your friends close and enemies closer.”**

## DAN

**“Sometimes the lambs have to lie down with the wolves.”**

### Bob's Point of View:

*“Keep your friends close and enemies closer.”* How many times have you heard a board director or committee chair tell a constant complainer that they should run for the board or join the committee? Sometimes it's just a brush off or attempt to call their bluff, but too often the director or committee chair is misguidedly serious. Having heard that old axiom so often they've come to believe it. According to Siri, the statement can originally be attributed to Sun Tzu, the early Chinese military strategist. Surely it has some validity in business as in war, but hopefully your board and its committee nominating or appointment process uses a higher set of criteria than this. After all, disagreeable people are usually just that and the functioning of your board and committees will surely suffer.

In a 2017 *Harvard Business Review* article, author Thomas Cahmorro-Premuzic defines in chart form what he refers to as the “dark traits” of three categories of personalities. What he postulates is disturbing: that disagreeable people often mask these traits well with a friendly smile or playful nature. However, when untethered, they can be very disruptive, quarrelsome, passive-aggressive, outspoken and prone to perfectionism and micromanagement among a host of other potentially disruptive behaviors.

Often a leader will believe that the disruptive force will get marginalized or their effects be diluted when the board or committee is of a large size, but it can have exactly the reverse effect if not managed properly. Generally, the argu-

mentative person will find ways to disrupt at the opportune time. One of the main detractors of a large committee or board is that the less engaged members tend to find the distant seats where they can kibitz with their allies and build their own consensus on the group discussion. In this situation, it may be wise to move such people to the middle of the table where you can keep them close and under a watchful eye and influence of the leadership.

Leaders need a better way to deal with constant complainers than to patronize them and empower them with the recognition they receive from listening to them at length or encouraging them to join the board or a committee. The first step is to reroute their complaints through the club's reporting system—if it's about a meal, direct them to the dining room manager, if it's slow play, tell the golf pro. If the complaint is critical to the club's performance, it will find its way up through the committee system and then board, should that be necessary.

## COUNTER POINT

### Dan's Point of View

*“Sometimes the lambs have to lie down with the wolves.”* Bill Gates was talking about working with competitors for the mutual advantage of both, but the expression can also be interpreted to mean that leaders must open themselves up to dissenting views and non-allies. Not all discussion or differing viewpoints are counterproductive. Some people are argumentative just for the sake of being provocative, to push blue sky thinking or to serve as the devil's advocate. For these

purposes, a controlled argument, or debate, may be productive, but it takes special skills for the leader to keep the discussions within bounds and productive. Generally, large boards and committees beyond 12 members are less cohesive and functional than smaller boards, but that is not to say that there shouldn't be a position for the independent thinker irrespective of size.

Regardless of your view on the value of having a dissenter on the board or committee, the process for nominating and assigning all participants must be intentional. Too often the nominating process for board members and selection

and approvals for committee members and their chairs are not well designed. In each case, the system should be designed to determine the needs of the board and committees and the means to scour the membership for candidates with the needed skill set, interest, time and diversity.

Free thinkers who will challenge the status quo are not likely to be the meek, reticent type, and they should certainly not be shackled! However, every board or committee member or candidates for those same positions need to genuinely embrace several fundamental non-profit governance principles: decision

making for the greater good, conflict of interest, confidentiality, deferential group thinking, adherence to committee charters and grants and limits of authority, to name a few. **cd**



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