Finding Common Ground

Working with ‘unique’ Board or Council members

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We’ve all seen or heard about people that can be called ‘Outliers’

The one who sits on a council, board or commission and steadfastly refuses to act like a member of the team. They tend to

• isolate themselves as the only person on the losing side

• create havoc

• refuse to recognize the norms that guide the rest of the body

Today we’re going to talk about how that happens and strategies to work with these ‘unique’ individuals
First, A Poll Question

Do you have an ‘Outlier’ ...
___ As an elected or appointed official on your Board / Commission
___ As a colleague at work
___ Other

Do you consider the situation to be
___ mildly annoying but manageable
___ increasingly challenging to getting things done
___ a horrible situation that negatively impacts the organization
Everybody who is ‘unique’ is not an Outlier

• They may simply be new, represent a different demographic, or just want to question the status quo

• They may have a different philosophy (for example, on spending or priorities)

• People have different work styles, or different communication styles

• Always remember that they have a right to be different! This is not, in and of itself, a problem
• They are a ‘lone crusader’, elected to shake up the status quo

• They view themselves as ‘independent thinkers’. May be highly intelligent but are not ‘people persons’

• They like being the outsider, enjoy arguments for arguments sake, appear to have little regard for the feelings of others

• They feel they are always right (everyone else is wrong); they are ethical (others aren’t), they are looking out for citizens (others don’t)

• They may be pegged and treated as an ‘outlier’ making things worse
The First Question to Consider

Could **you** possibly be the Outlier?

• How are you perceived by your peers?

If you have some concern that it could be **You**...

• Appreciate that having success can’t happen without collaboration and the support of others

• Work to rebuild trust and respect – look for a fresh restart

• Lean on staff to help you out
Ideas that could help someone avoid becoming an Outlier

• Give new people a chance, listen to them

• Work hard to understand and appreciate their perspective

• Have them attend ‘Newly Elected Officials’ training programs and other Association activities (have this become ‘automatic’)

• Have a thorough, high quality ‘onboarding’ process in place

• Consider a ‘mentor’ to help them

• Watch your own words and actions – don’t ‘trigger’ or inadvertently push them to become an Outlier
Things to remember...

• **Power**
  - In an elected situation, things can only be accomplished by the majority of the governing board...

• **Goals**
  - Usually elected or appointed officials have a list of goals they want to accomplish, which can only happen with the support of others

• **Interests**
  - Try to figure out their underlying interests. Beyond their positions or their votes, why are they acting the way they are?
The Negative Impact of an Outlier on the Organization

• While it may be entertaining for some citizens, it is embarrassing for most
• It can result in a dysfunctional governing body, possibly increasing lawsuits
• Can cause anger, frustration and possible resignation for other members
• Can siphon energy away that should be spent on more positive endeavors
• It can impact staff, crush morale, and lead to staff turnover
• In the end, the Outlier can become ignored and marginalized
• And it can take the fun out of public service!
• Two School Board members on social media
• An Outlier on my City Council
• Difference over a vote leads to future collaboration
How do you address the issue of an Outlier?

#1 Always remember that you can only control yourself and your response

When considering how to intervene in a situation:

• Be clear to yourself which behaviors are inappropriate and why; and how they are negatively impacting the governing board or staff or the public. And that it wasn’t just one time...

• Who should take the lead? Likely the Board chair or leader...or perhaps another member? (it could be the head staff member / administrator)

  • The administrator must protect their staff
How do you address the issue of an Outlier?

• Have a personal and informal discussion in a neutral environment (not at a board meeting, and certainly not televised)
  • Remember: people may need a path to ‘resetting’ their situation

• You may want consider addressing it as part of a larger discussion about governing norms at a ‘retreat’

• Perhaps you want to use an outside facilitator to help (via a facilitated dialogue or perhaps a team-building exercise)

• Remember that there may be mental health issues ...

• When all else fails, there are more formal options (censure, etc. ?)
What if the efforts don’t work?

• Always consider the role you play in both the problem and the solution

• Keep communications open – stay professional and mature

• Keep it in perspective – don’t let them monopolize your attention

• Marginalize and isolate – limit the damage as much as possible

• Help your colleagues and staff stay positive and focused on the good and important work of the organization

This is not easy to ‘fix’ – so be ready to move on
• Office of Collaboration and Dispute Resolution Website
  https://mn.gov/admin/ocdr

• Governing Bodies and the Outlier Syndrome

• The Outlier – Coping with a Disruptive Elected Official

• Dealing with a Grandstander
  https://www.ca-ilg.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/resources_Everyday_Ethics_Aug02_0.pdf

• Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking when Stakes are High
  a book by Patterson and others.

• Onboarding resources from your Association
Review of Questions and Comments in the Chat
THANK YOU

DEPARTMENT OF ADMINISTRATION
OFFICE OF COLLABORATION
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