

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

Characteristics of an Outlier

- 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!

Real World Scenarios

- 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 about 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

Resources

- Office of Collaboration and Dispute Resolution Website
<https://mn.gov/admin/ocdr>
- Governing Bodies and the Outlier Syndrome
<https://www.cirsa.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Governing-Bodies-and-The-Outlier-Syndrome.pdf>
- The Outlier – Coping with a Disruptive Elected Official
https://www.ca-ilg.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/outlier_elected_officials.pdf
- 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**



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