

# Cut the Tension, Build Trust

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It's your first meeting as a new board member, and you're ready to help the organization accomplish great things. You shake hands all around and settle into your chair. But as the meeting begins you sense that all is not as it should be; you sense tension in the air.

Of all the challenges you were expecting, a tense environment was not one of them. The thought crosses your mind that it would have been useful to have been filled in as to the current state of affairs before you found yourself in the middle of it, and you can't help but think that the orientation process for new board members should be improved.

It's clear that there's an almost palpable level of distrust, but because you have insufficient background information, you have difficulty concluding what the underlying issues are or identifying the key players involved. You want to help, but what should you do?

The short answer: Gather data. If you have not already received a copy of the strategic plan, ask for a one, along with any updates on accomplishments. No strategic plan, you say? You may well have discovered at least one source of distrust. Without a strategic plan, it's likely that there is no consensus on what is to be accomplished, which almost always results in a divisive environment.

Similarly, a strategic plan without a progress report might also indicate why there's distrust. It means that there is no common understanding of how success is going to be measured.

If you have not already been provided with minutes from the last several board meetings, ask for them. They may highlight particular problems, and at the very least they'll provide insight into what was and what was not on the agenda.

Whatever you discover, your next

step is to have two important cordial conversations. The first should be with the board chair, because you are now a member of his or her team. The second should be with the CEO.

You can begin both conversations thus: "I want to be a good, productive member of the board. Can you tell me a little more about how the board gets its work done?" The next logical question might be: "What kinds of things does the board see an effective board member doing, and what kinds of things does the board not want its members doing?" Let the conversation proceed from there. But before it winds to a close, ask both what they see as the association's three major challenges for the coming year.

These conversations are likely to give you a better understanding of why the

CEO to participate in a program where the two can identify goals that they can champion.

The variety of problems you may identify is endless. Here are a few more common ones:

- Because there is no clarity or consensus on what constitutes success, board members are wary of initiatives the CEO pursues.
- The CEO has forgotten that the organization is not his or hers and makes decisions the board believes should be made by the board.
- The board believes the CEO's behavior is inappropriate, either in terms of good management practice or professional conduct.
- There may simply be a disagreement over a substantive issue on the part of one or more parties at interest.

How you should proceed depends entirely on the facts and circumstances you have identified, because the cure will depend on the problem. But in almost all of these cases, serious and

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distrustful environment exists. They may, in fact, provide you with enough data to help you to suggest solutions, because what the organization should do next depends on the circumstances.

If the problem you have identified is a lack of clarity on what is to be accomplished, you might offer to chair a strategic planning committee, or at least ask when this process is going to be undertaken. If the problem appears to be a communication breakdown, you might (politely) encourage the chair and

open conversations are strongly encouraged, whether they be about roles and responsibilities, decision authorities and process, or specific substantive issues. Your goal is to clear the air and encourage a majority of the board to accept what must be done. Only then can the atmosphere of distrust and divisiveness be put to rest.

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