



The Top 10 No-No's for Board Newbies

Why do people seek election to their co-op or condo board? Sometimes, they're invited by the board to run. Other times, it's a form of civic pride – they have a skill which may be helpful to the board or association, or they're willing to donate their time and expertise. Still other times they disagree with a decision by the board and they hope to bring a new perspective. Sometimes, things are so bad that they see themselves as leaders of a movement to bring the association out of its dark days and into the promised land.

Regardless of their motivation, newly elected board members should understand their role: they were elected to be part of a team, and they're expected to work together with the other board members for the betterment of the association. Except in the rarest cases, they were not elected to implement their agenda; nor were they elected to halt someone else's agenda. Experience has taught us that a co-op or condo is best served not by transforming the board into a mini-Congress replete with factions, caucuses, polarizing personalities, and threats of fiscal cliffs and nuclear options.

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Newly elected board members often mischaracterize their election as a mandate to fly solo, often with damaging consequences for the board, the association, and its members. Here are the top 10 mistakes newly elected co-op directors or condo managers should avoid:

10 Making most discussions about themselves

There's no "I" in teamwork, and board business is about the betterment of the association for its members, not about the board members. The board can quickly become dysfunctional if meetings must be rescheduled to suit a new member, or if decisions are delayed so new members "can look into it some more." It's okay to take time to get up to speed, but don't derail the process simply because you can.

09 Showing up the managing agent

Don't be arrogant. After being elected, some new board members start compiling lists of items not being addressed by the managing agent, criticizing the agent's processes, inundating the manager with e-mails

and calls, and generally being a nuisance. Not a smart move. The agent is a key member of the board's team. A good manager implements the board's decisions, communicates with the shareholders, brings potential issues to the board's attention – hopefully before they become critical – and runs general interference for the inevitable unpopular decisions boards are forced to make. In short, a good working relationship between the board and managing agent is critical. Don't ruin it.

08 Advocating for specific individuals or their causes

All for one and none for all? When one person advocates on behalf of a specific person, the person may wonder why only one board member is siding with them. This creates the impression that no one but the new board member is doing anything or even cares. This invariably creates a rift in the board and is a poor way to work as a team member.

07 Trying to change every policy

Idiots are us? This philosophy is often bred from outright contempt for the board. It causes the new board member to oppose everything prior boards did, on the assumption that they were all idiots. Most boards develop their policies after consulting with their managing agent and attorney, so the policies are often based on years of combined experience. Be realistic: not everything the prior board did was wrong, and acting as if it was all wrong will have you labeled a naysayer. Newly elected board members are best advised to pick their battles carefully.

06 Taking up every cause

Politics is not a simple game. Like some of the prior mistakes, a desire to play politics, to advocate for those who have been wronged by some perceived slight can lead to trouble. New board members will quickly learn that not every complaint is valid,

that even fewer can be documented, and that advocating for a complainer generally means advocating against someone else. Failure to learn this lesson will result in damage to the new board member's credibility.

05 Failing to learn the lessons of history

Those who fail to learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them. This is true. Most co-op and condo policies were born from trial and error and have been modified to minimize future errors. Before proposing something, particularly major changes, please do some research.

04 Wanting to put an imprint on every board decision

No one is going to erect a statue to you. We once witnessed a newly elected co-op director propose that the revised house rules increase the driveway speed limit from 5 to 8 m.p.h., and force children to walk, not ride, their bicycles on sidewalks, not in the parking area or driveway. Not surprisingly, the new director's proposals were in retaliation for another director's complaints about him speeding in the driveway. Striking back at his children "in the name of safety" made sense to the newly elected member. Another newly elected member proposed a new house rule to prohibit automatic garage door openers because they were for "convenience-driven, i.e. lazy people." All these proposals were rejected, but not without wasting everyone's time. Think before you propose.

03 Trying to set the agenda

Call it the "out with the old" syndrome. Immediately after the annual meeting, some new board members start circulating lists of "priorities" and "new procedures." The current ways are simply not good enough. The next few meetings are unbearable and drag on for three to four hours. Generally, it is best to work within the system to propose your changes.

02 Going rogue

It's the "trust no one" effect. After the election, what was previously a confidential board communication starts circulating. All of a sudden, residents know who said what at a board meeting. Or the new board member starts investigations, forms committees, calls contractors, proposes a new accountant, and generally operates on his or her own. Or maybe the member forms a caucus with a few other members. In a few weeks, everyone learns this person can't be trusted and, to the extent possible, is excluded from everything but formal board meetings and votes. Once again, the solution is to be a team player.

01 Suffering from "smartest person in the room" syndrome

As soon as he or she is elected, this board member starts investigating everything, such as how the minutes six years ago reported that three bids for each contract were required, but the manager only obtained two to clean the compactor chute. Or how the managing agent's contract requires the building financials be sent to the board by the 10th day of the month, but they are regularly delivered at the meeting *after* the 10th. Or that the brick-pointing contractor worked on a weekend, in violation of municipal ordinances. This new board member then introduces a series of proposals to address the perceived inadequacies he "uncovered." What were generally routine exercises, such as approving meeting minutes and renewing contracts for exterminators, now become enmeshed in minutia and pointless debate. Meetings drag on, little is accomplished, but everyone is aware of just how *un*-intelligent the new board member is.

Becoming a board member at your co-op or condo can be a rewarding experience. But board service is about teamwork. If putting others first is not your thing, we recommend another line of work. ■