How to Deal with Silent or Unresponsive Board Members

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Eight techniques to deal with silent or unresponsive board members.
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How to Deal with the Silent or Unresponsive Board Member

Introduction

Do you have a board member who does not speak up? He doesn’t even have anything to say when you ask directly for his opinions. Do you try to cajole him into stating what he is thinking? When he responds, does he ‘sit on the fence.’ You aren’t sure whether he agrees or disagrees with the proposed solution to an issue.

Do you wonder what is really going through his minds? Is he ignoring the debate, engulfed in his own thoughts, or feeling superior to the other board members? Silence can provide a board member with time to think and weigh his own thoughts or it can be used as a form of aggression. If it is a form of aggression, the board has to take action to ensure that board member is a contributing member. The question is, “How does one engage the silent board member?” This article outlines eight techniques which may help. If you know of others, please let us know.

1. Pay attention to their body language

Pay attention to the board member’s body language, eye movements, and facial expression. Is he following the flow of the discussion, shifting his gaze from person to person when they speak, and/or changing his facial expressions based on the stance taken by the other board members? He may be listening. The debate may be too fast for him. Without thinking time he cannot formulate his opinions, therefore, he feels the best thing to do is to remain silent.

There are people who talk to think and those who need to think before they are willing to speak. What is your style? What makes you comfortable during a debate? Now reverse that situation and wonder what a board member with a different style would need in order to make a contribution to the board. Once you make that determination you can review the operations of the board and see if it supports both styles. If it does not, what
can the board do in the future to provide the unresponsive board member with the circumstances he needs to process information, formulate his thoughts and express them in an accepting environment?

If conditions support both thinking styles and you determine that the board member is deliberately unresponsive, then you need another strategy. One such strategy is using open-ended questions.

2. Use open-ended questions

Words or phrases which enable a board member to ask open-ended questions include

- How
- Why
- Could you provide examples of
- What do you mean by
- What would be the risks, or
- What would be the major concerns for you.

If you do use close-ended questions, that board member may nod his head or give you a one-word answer and that would end the conversation. If the board member is genuinely shy, he will welcome the opportunity to be included. If he has chosen an aggressive stance, he may study you and wonder how genuine you really are before responding.
3. Use positive body language

If you are tense, you may have a tendency to stare directly at him. It is better to

- Be prepared to expect any response and honor that response without judgement
- Lean a little forward as you speak or tilt your head forward
- Raise your eyebrows a little because you are sincerely expecting an answer, and
- Nod as they speak demonstrating that you are willing to listen longer.

Sitting with your arms folded or smirking when you speak will not help in any way. Trust is evaluated by your body language. When you sit patiently you are honoring their need to think.

4. Honor silent moments

The tendency is to fill in silent moments. Just try remaining silent for 15-30 seconds. It sounds like a short time but it feels like a long time. Refrain, if at all possible, from filling in the gaps. If you do forget yourself and start talking, re-engage the unresponsive board members by asking their opinion about the thoughts you just expressed and wait.

If the silent board member shows visible emotions, name them. Questions such as, “You seem really displeased right now, am I reading that correctly?” If he says, “Yes,” then you can continue by asking an open-ended question. The key is to continue to honor where the person is coming from and simultaneously enable the board to function effectively.
5. Establish the ground rules for board member participation in discussions

Does your board establish ground rules for discussion when you are orientating board members? If so, it may be appropriate to revisit those at the next meeting. If not, it may be essential to establish them now.

Examples of ground rules include

1. All divergent opinions are welcome.
2. Each board member participates by expressing his own opinions and the opinions of those he represents.
3. Honor time-limits set for discussion and debate.
4. Keep all commitments and report back as required
5. Listen attentively to all other board members and avoid side conversations
6. No informal meetings outside the formal meetings.
7. Speak openly in the boardroom and speak with one voice outside it.
8. Silence is agreement.

This list may be sufficient to start the debate around the boardroom table. It will set the same expectations for each board member. The silent board member will see that he is not being treated differently from anyone else. He may be more open to attempts to encourage him to express himself.

6. Be encouraging

Remain encouraging and positive even when the board member remains silent and unresponsive. You may want to react to the blandness, negativity or hostility but don’t. Remind him that you are sincere and his opinion matters to you. When he does begin to speak, refrain from stepping closer or touching him. Just listen.
7. **Listen attentively**

It is essential to listen and acknowledge what is being said without interrupting. Also, if possible do not try to move back to the agenda too swiftly. Allow time for each topic, especially any topic which is important to him. Be supportive.

8. **Offer support**

Remind him that he is an essential member of the board. The rules of engagement apply to all of the board members. The aim of the board is to leave a positive legacy and his contribution is important. Every member of the team is significant.

**Final Comment**

Dealing with the unresponsive board member can be very trying. If he is given the support and knows the rules for participation but does not participate, the board may have to take action. That action may be

- Ignoring him
- Asking him to leave the board
- Bringing in a person to settle the issue in a formalized manner, or
- Look at candidates’ style before choosing new board members.

Boards play such a vital role. Each voice is critical.

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