# IS YOUR BOARD HOLDING YOU BACK?

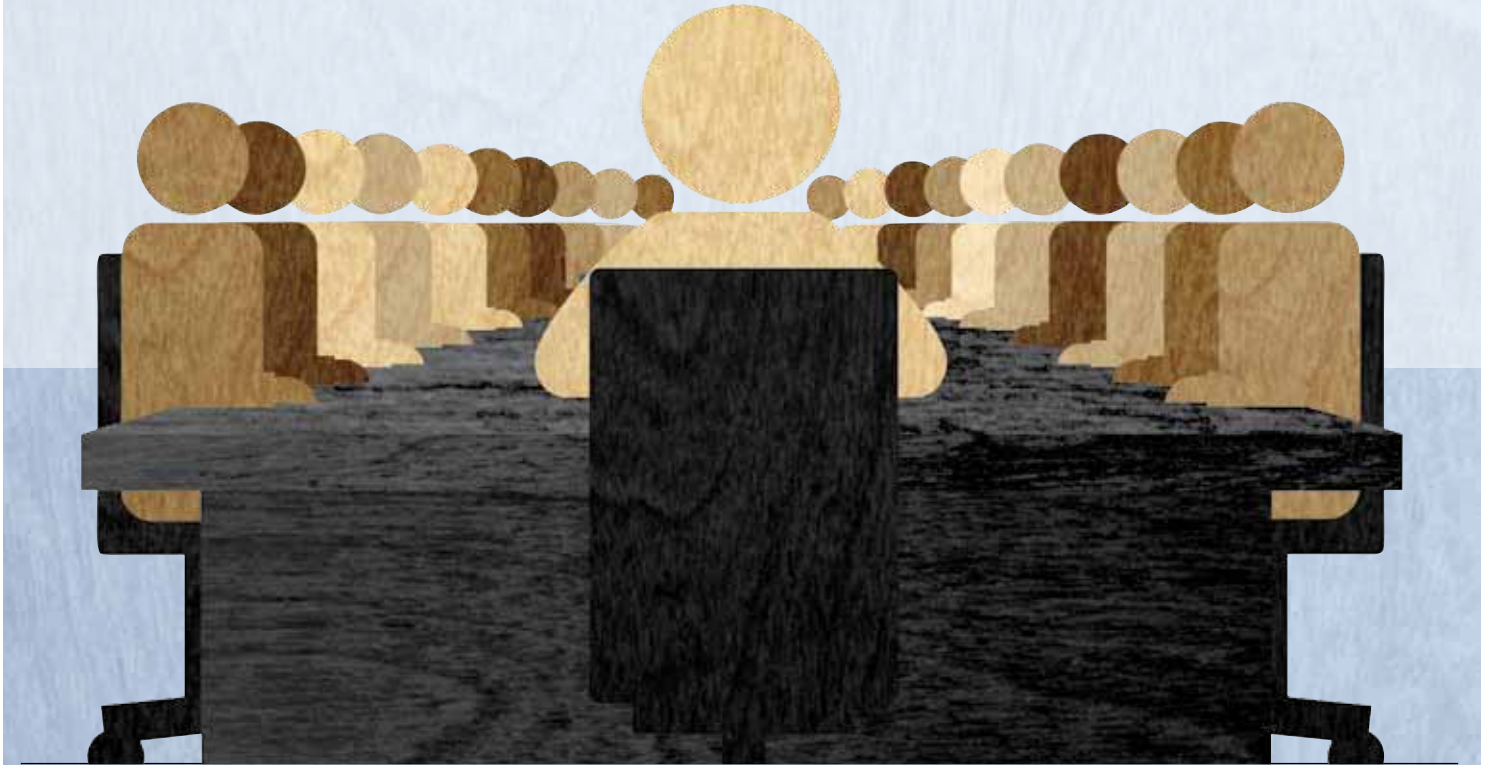
*by LOLA GERSHFELD*

You may think a large board would be more effective because two heads, or in this case many heads, are better than one. However, quantity does not always mean quality. Whether you have a for-profit or not-for-profit board, a room of disengaged people is sure to hold you and your organization back. As a board dynamics specialist, I can quickly spot common challenges when working with large boards (exceeding twelve members). Here are five of the top challenges I have found and few suggestions on how to address them.

**Challenge 1: Disengagement**

Board members may be attending your meetings, but are they mindfully present? Disengagement often results from board members' lack of interest in the agenda topics, and may reflect the fact that they were not asked for input on the agenda. It may also indicate that they feel intimidated in voicing their opinions.

**How to Fix It**: Creating engagement is one of the prerequisites to having a functioning board. Here are a couple of techniques you can try: (1) Pay attention to each board member, solicit ideas and opinions on a continual basis, and acknowledge his or her participation. (2) Present information by presenting questions, not just facts. For example, "Here are last quarter's results. Could we discuss some of the factors that may have been responsible?"



### Challenge 2: Disconnection

As hard as it may be to believe, there are boards whose members are not committed enough to devote their full attention to the agenda items and, instead, spend the time checking their emails or working on something else. These types of distractions can bring down the morale and affect the decision-making process.

**How to Fix It**: Reconnecting members should not only be the chairman's job but the responsibility of every board member. The goal is to keep the group's attention to the task at hand to maintain continuity of the group. Here are a couple of suggestions.

For extraordinary large boards of more than twenty members, use microphones. When people can hear everything well, they are more likely to listen to what is being said. In a large group, it is important for everyone to hear everything loud and clear. Make sure that the seating arrangements are done in a way so that when members speak, they are seen by everyone in the room. Encourage people to maintain eye contact when speaking.

Set time limits when members express their opinions. Nothing threatens engagement more than a rambling speech. As a guide, use three to five minutes to present a problem and one to two minutes to hear each response. Longer times could be necessary for a brainstorming session or a learning session from an expert on a particular topic.

### Challenge 3: Lacking Unity

Individual board members may be comfortable with some fellow directors and uncomfortable with others. These type of biases distort unity and cohesiveness of the group.

**How to Fix It**: People often are drawn to others when they have something in common. Being raised in the same city, married in the same month, or having similar professions are examples of things that connect people. Commonalities attract and create emotional connections.

In the course of a regular meeting, ensure there is sufficient down time, lunch, and/or a reception to give directors opportunities to get to know one another on a more personal basis. Set time aside to share personal stories, anecdotes, and personal successes. Encourage everyone to acknowledge each other's accomplishments.

Coach members on speaking skills before the meeting. This way, they will be able to effectively voice their opinions in a short time without losing the attention of their fellow board members.

### Challenge 4: Not Being on the Same Page

Board members may be in the same book, but if they are not on the same page, you have a problem. Some of the directors, especially those who do not have enough background on a topic, may not be on the same page when it comes to understanding the issues during a discussion.

**How to Fix It**: Having board members on the same page not only strengthens their bond but increases the likelihood that they will make more informed decisions. Giving opportunities to discuss matters creates a sense of connection and importance. There are a couple ways to accomplish this.

Creating engagement is one of the prerequisites to having a functioning board.

Encourage board members to be prepared for the meeting. Provide enough context and background information days in advance so that every board member fully understands the context and every point on the agenda.

In order to ensure that members feel valued, and that their time is well spent, they need to feel engaged. If it becomes challenging to keep all members engaged, as a last resort, consider having small breakout groups to discuss certain topics.

### Challenge 5: Needing Motivation

When board members leave the meetings, over time, they may forget about the issues discussed at the meeting. Without any specific assignment, they may make little or no effort to think about or otherwise address any challenges between meetings.

**How to Fix It**: When people are engaged in solving problems, they are more likely to think about these problems and come up with creative solutions outside the boardroom.

Even when the most serious topics are being discussed, it is important to leave some room for humor and levity to reduce stress and make discussions more enjoyable. In their research, University of California professors Howard S. Friedman and Ronald E. Riggio found that whenever people are near each other, their emotions are infectious, even when contact is completely nonverbal.[1] Laughter spontaneously energizes the group, spreading a sense of connection.

Make sure that everyone leaves each meeting on a positive note. This will help board members feel satisfied and energized, which will make them look forward to the next meeting.

I've seen firsthand how leaders and their boards can be transformed with the implementation of some of these techniques. As board members, we all have the capacity to take hold of the reins and steer the board in the right direction. Using these tips and techniques will help you in getting your board out of the gate, advancing toward the finish line.

ENDNOTE

(1) Howard Friedman and Ronald Riggio, Effect of Individual Differences in Nonverbal Expressiveness on Transmission of Emotion, Journal of Nonverbal Behavior 6, 32-58 (1981).

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