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Consensus Building For Community Associations

Winning the Support and Approval of
Your Community for Board Decisions

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The Art of Consensus Building

Success Depends Upon Cooperation

Community association board members and managers are responsible for carrying out business that protects literally millions of dollars worth of real estate. Daily problems arise that range in magnitude and importance, but all require sound business judgment to resolve. Many times what is also required is the cooperation or consensus of association residents comprised of different interests, values and personalities! Their cooperation can mean the difference between solving a problem on paper and actually solving it. It is virtually impossible to solve big or complex problems without having adverse effects on at least some interests. Consequently, almost any big or complex problem will not get unanimous support from your public. Community involvement includes a certain amount of conflict between you and your members. A good community participation process may not make you popular, but can earn you respect.

The bottom line is that association leaders and managers must act in ways that do not necessarily please some individuals when they are striving to meet the needs of the entire association. When conflicting opinions on what should happen arise, the result can be costly in both a social and financial sense.

Many community associations are beginning to identify a formula for successfully generating homeowner support for the decisions they must make. They are finding that by engaging in a proactive dispute resolution process of strategic communication and collaborative decision-making, conflict is avoided or minimized and many attempts to "thwart the system" by association residents are replaced by acts of support and approval. At the very least, they are replaced by a "reluctant willingness" to go along with a course of action simply because the decision-making process included these individuals early on. Cooperation, on any level, means the freedom for the directors and management to implement a solution with minimized social and financial costs.

Building an Adequate Support Base

Consensus does not mean that every household must enthusiastically and totally support every aspect associated with a particular course of action that the board decides it must pursue. It does mean that the decision is supported (sometimes reluctantly so) because everyone believes that the action is, overall, in the best interest of all homeowners-- because it addresses, to some extent, the majority of needs.

Developing consensus among homeowners does not always come easily. In fact, homeowners will even fight a board proposed course of action if they do not believe that it is addressing a serious problem and that the process used to develop the course of action is legitimate. The single most important criterion that people use in deciding whether a problem is serious is: it will, in some way, substantially jeopardize their quality of life. The criterion that is used to determine whether a process is legitimate is: the process took into consideration the members' input and needs early on!

The biggest single obstacle to broad community participation is something we call apathy. It is the nature of the beast that people who will be hurt by a project (or think they will) want to become directly involved but those who will benefit or not be affected prefer to remain on the sidelines. Interests who participate - or have the opportunity to participate - generally, do not and cannot take extremist or irresponsible positions as readily as those who do not participate. An interest (even a potentially powerful interest) that refuses to participate early in a project's planning process loses a lot of credibility in the eyes of his/her peers, provided that it is clear that his/her participation was actively solicited and that he/she refused. Some interests who do participate in your project's decision-making process have a motive of their own that has nothing to do with the project itself. Your community members - as well as you and your peers - tend to base action not on reality, but on your perception of reality.

Too many times a board of directors will have a proposal rejected (and homeowners angry to boot) just to have one very similar in nature approved at a later time. This is usually due to the "damage control" efforts (i.e. some type of mediation process) that the board pursues after their proposal is rejected and everyone is angry. The mediation process simply does something the board should have done prior to its decision making efforts. That is simply to involve the members in the results and in the decision-making process. Once homeowners feel "on board" they have a tendency to cooperate. Think about the time, money and feelings that would be spared if consensus building efforts were employed each time a board had to make an important decision.

In summary, the key to preventing conflict, and even generating support, over a course of action depends upon the following areas of accomplishment:

1. **Responsibility:** homeowners must believe that the board is acting totally within their proper powers and responsibilities and that it is being reasonable and fair in the course of action that is being proposed.
2. **Responsiveness:** homeowners must believe that the proposed course of action corresponds, as much as ABSOLUTELY possible, to their values and interests and that any tradeoffs that occur are equitable and fair.
3. **Effectiveness:** homeowners must believe that there is an effective two-way communication between them and the board and association manager, and that there exists a strong desire to listen and compromise.

A Community Involvement Process that WILL Build Support

There are many techniques that can be used, within a consensus building process, to build agreement and prevent major conflict. Before these are reviewed, it is important to discuss some general recommendations that associations should consider in developing a process to build support.

1. Begin the consensus building process with the introduction of a compelling problem statement that includes how the association and its members are (or will be) adversely affected by the problem or situation and what will happen if the problem or situation is not addressed.
 - ✓ Most the individuals in community associations resent having the Board tell them "what's good for them." Consequently, the goal of "educating the public" is not a wise one.
 - ✓ Whether members with a specific interest will be willing to accept a particular solution to a problem depends not just on what that solution looks like, but on whether the solution is being "imposed."

2. Within that introduction, the board should express its duty and responsibility for addressing the problem and its commitment to pursue the feasibility of taking action. If your members feel that a major project decision was made in a manner that is not appropriate or legitimate - even though they might like the decision itself - they will not accept the decision. If your members perceive the decision-making process of a project to be "fair," it is willing to live with a project that impacts different interests unequally. While the members with various interests are capable of making requests, voicing desires, listing wants and needs that are quite unreasonable - in the end, they are capable of discerning between what is really legitimate and what is not. Professionals working in the public arena today are not given much presumption of professional expertise. They have to prove why the recommended course of action is the best course of action. Today everyone is their own "expert." Your credibility - your "believability" - is one of your most indispensable resources in the consensus building process.
3. Elicit input from the homeowners regarding the board's plan to address a situation and some options that might be used. Eliciting input is not always easy because homeowners typically do not voice what is important to them. What seems to be easiest for them is to react to something - in the form of options - as long as those options are plural (more than one) and it is clear that they have not been finalized. Why? Providing only one option makes people feel trapped, and any option in final form would mean that homeowner concerns were not considered.

Consequently, if association leaders and managers can place before their constituency a range of alternatives (not quite in final form) - thus offering them choices and an opportunity to enhance those options - there is a strong likelihood that their values and needs will be brought to light through their selection of an option and the process of refining that option.

Always remember, doing nothing (this is often called the "null alternative") is an alternative that should always be considered. If the board does an adequate job, however, on educating residents of the negative consequences associated with the null alternative, homeowners will not, as a rule, select it. If, nonetheless, they do choose to do nothing about the problem, there is a strong likelihood that it is not as important as the board thinks. Pursuing the particular problem might be better received at a different time.

It is difficult to get people involved in the planning of a project until there is a proposal - something to react to. Providing options to your public means providing freedom. Providing only one choice seems more like an imposition. Choosing the "best" course of action from the alternatives is essentially a political process for your community.

4. In efforts to describe the problem and present a range of alternatives that could address it, it is recommended the board provide sufficient time for homeowner education and input so that they have ample opportunity to ask questions, add further options, refine options, and decide on what works for them and the association. This period is critical for addressing the psychological and procedural interests of residents. Generally, if they feel that the board considers their viewpoints and concerns, they will support the substantive interests of the board.

Most people will not participate in planning process unless: The issues are clear and tangible; The members consider the issues significant; and they consider themselves capable of making a contribution.

5. Take the time to make a final review of the proposed course of action with homeowners prior to implementing that action. Not all people can visualize what a proposed course of action will be like, in reality, by reading a report or reviewing a set of plans. In fact, they will not even admit that they cannot understand something that is presented to them for review. Usually the board must SPELL OUT intentions in a variety of clear and illustrative ways. For example, if buildings need to be painted, conduct a demonstration project where one building or one side of a building is painted with a proposed color so that residents can actually see for themselves what the color is actually like.

Remember, that despite how effective homeowners consider a course of action to be, there is a strong likelihood that they will resist it if they believe that the process used to reach that action was not "legitimate."

There are a myriad of "public involvement" techniques that a board of directors can use to build support for the decisions they must make. A few of these techniques are briefly examined below.

Public Involvement Techniques

Meetings

Holding meetings to communicate and, therefore, manage conflict can be useful. Meetings, however, are vastly overused. Many are willing to call a meeting at the drop of a hat but less willing to plan and execute the meeting in a way that proves productive (and painless). Questions to ask before a meeting is called include:

"What would be the purpose of the meeting?"

"How can we maximize the chances of accomplishing that purpose?"

"What should be on the agenda?"

"What discussion guideline should be imposed to ensure maximum efficiency and order?"

Far too many meetings do more damage than good because they leave people frustrated and dissatisfied. If people cannot adjourn a meeting without saying that they feel a sense of accomplishment, to some degree, the meeting should be subject to serious evaluation. One good way to discover whether or not your meetings are well spent is to quite simply ask through a brief evaluation period at the end of the session. Feedback may be painful, but it is important for board credibility.

One strong advantage of holding a meeting is that people have the opportunity to interact personally with one another. A disadvantage is that when people representing varying interests (and who are far from reaching consensus) meet, they have a tendency to become even more polarized.

If the purpose of a meeting is to gather concerns (in other words, vent!), it may be advisable for the board not to attend, but, instead, hire a professional facilitator to lead the meeting. Also, residents who may be perceived as informal leaders in the community can be requested to lead such a meeting.

There are many types of meetings ... working meetings, open houses, town meetings, public forums and more. Each are designed to accomplish different things related to managing conflict within community associations.

Working Meetings

Working meetings are designed for a small group (no more than twelve) to engage in a problem-solving process. Although these meetings are well planned with a specific agenda, they allow for free flowing, give and take, discussion. The primary goal of a working meeting is to reach consensus by clearly identifying areas of disagreement and agreement so that the participants can expand on the areas of agreement by talking through and addressing the difficult areas. A working meeting is essentially a group negotiation process. Such techniques as parliamentary procedure are not recommended for working meetings because they restrict open and creative discussion.

A purpose for holding a working meeting might be to address conflict between the board and architectural control committee over covenant enforcement methods.

Forums

A forum is not designed to accomplish a specific task or to negotiate an issue. Rather, it is designed to air differences through constructive dialogue. A forum comes in handy when the board must make a quick

decision but feels that the issues are not yet well defined. Holding a forum allows the board to be as effective and responsive as possible ... in relation to the time at hand. To organize a forum, one should:

- o extend an open invitation and publicize it widely;
- o at the beginning of the forum, clearly state the purpose of having to make a quick decision with as much homeowner input as possible;
- o have a neutral party moderate;
- o invite each interest to briefly voice their viewpoint; and
- o document concerns in a "verbatim" format, reporting their comments exactly as they said them.

For follow-up, it is important to make the documentation of the meeting available for the homeowners to review. After the board develops the course of action that was, to the degree possible, based upon the input received at the forum, it should announce that resulting decision and explain how it took homeowner concerns into consideration. If it did not, it is also important to explain why. Although making quick decisions is not recommended for important issues, a forum is the best way possible to demonstrate responsiveness in an emergency situation.

The Open House

An open house is an informal setting in which the association board of directors has the opportunity to provide information to homeowners regarding some problem and the range of options available to address that problem. It provides the homeowners time to review the information, ask questions, react to alternatives, and make further suggestions regarding solutions. It is best to schedule an open house over a few days to accommodate diverse schedules. Another advantage of having people attend at their leisure is that it discourages the "gang mentality" that exists when a large group of polarized interests convene. The board has the chance to bridge gaps through friendly, informal "one on one" discussion.

The open house should take place in a clubhouse or some other public building such as a room in the local library or school. Since the purpose is for homeowners to review material for consideration, it is essential that the board and association manager do their "homework" and are ready to effectively display information, through pictures, illustrations, and charts that depict the problem and proposed solutions. Care should be taken to provide displays of information that are clear and simply understood. Handouts should also be provided for homeowners to take home. At the open house, it is helpful to ask homeowners to complete some type of survey specifying their reactions to the information as well as their input regarding solutions.

Important note: Board members should appear genuinely objective about solutions and not place themselves in a position where they are defending any one particular option.

The open house is one of the most effective techniques for generating support for a major decision.

The Town Meeting

The town meeting has been called the cornerstone of the democratic process. It is an exciting community event that is quite useful for generating community spirit and support for a whole menu of actions. Quite like the public forum, the town meeting is useful for the board of directors to listen to what association homeowners have to say about the current issues as well as their sentiments, aspirations, and hopes regarding the place where they live. The town meeting also provides a time for two-way dialogue between the board of directors and the homeowners they represent.

A town meeting should be a semi-informal event where homeowners can feel comfortable interacting with their neighbors. Scheduling it on a Saturday morning with a pancake breakfast and child care can go a long way to ensure attendance.

It is an excellent first step within any strategic planning process because it assists in generating homeowner

input in relation to prioritizing projects for the new year's budget. By gaining consensus on spending before it happens, the board can build support for its actions throughout the year.

The Nominal-Group Workshop

This technique is designed with the premise that those closest to a situation (i.e. homeowners) can identify any problem associated with it as well as solutions to address it.

For maximum success, it is important to have as many homeowners as possible participate in a nominal group workshop. The board first gives background on the problem and gives homeowners an opportunity to ask questions to clarify the information. Once it is understood that everyone is clear on all background information, the homeowners break into small groups of four or five, are given small note cards, and are asked to confer regarding their perceived issues related to a particular situation. For example, the groups should respond to the question "What important issues do you believe our association should address over the next five years?" and "What might be one or two effective ways to address each issue?"

After each group addresses two or three important issues or considerations, they place them on the note cards and then reconvene into the larger group. After reconvening, each group shares their work with the rest. From this interchange comes a combined list of issues that is then prioritized, by vote, according to importance. This list of issues, and the suggestions made for addressing them, is then used by the board in its planning and decision-making throughout the year.

Recognize the Unspoken Needs of the Participants

Members object to proposed actions for a number of reasons. If you can look beyond the content of your members' comments to their motivation in making the comments, you may be able to address their needs and wants without conceding much. Owners generally actively oppose projects or Board actions for four reasons:

- Misinformation, misperception or exaggerated fears
- Unmet Emotional Needs
- Conflicts of Values
- Conflicts of Interest

Depending on the member's motivation for actively opposing an action or project, the Board can take various steps to eliminate or address the motivational concerns and obtain support from these individuals.

Misinformation

Opposition based on misinformation or misperceptions is the easiest type of resistance to overcome. Boards often rely on unilateral communications (Board meetings, newsletters, minutes) to educate people. Many of the meeting techniques listed above can assist in overcoming opposition caused by misinformation. However, the Board should carefully consider the format and purposes of the meeting prior to scheduling one. Community meetings often do little more than introduce potential opponents to each other and allow them to hear and adopt each other's positions.

If opposition is not caused by a lack of information, disgorging endless data will simply stir people up. Rather, the Board or committee members can correct misinformation problems by establishing their credibility and openly discussing the action or project and the steps taken to arrive at the decision to undertake the action or project.

Unmet Emotional Needs

Some opposition stems from your members' unmet emotional needs. Perhaps the opposition comes from a past Board member who made significant contributions to the community but was not consulted on the proposed action or decision. Certain professionals within your community may also wish to be included in

the process to meet their need to communicate expertise in a particular area. These people are best involved in task forces and committees where their involvement can be direct and visible.

Meeting your opponents' emotional needs is usually the least expensive way to reduce opposition to your action or project. You may need to allow your members to vent their anger toward you. You may need to apologize. And, you may even need to overcome your own anger and resentment and show your members the consideration they feel they deserve. BUT, you generally do not have to make costly or important concessions to overcome this type of opposition.

Conflict of Values

Board decisions can be opposed because they conflict with the values of certain members. Remember that you cannot negotiate values. If you share your opponents' moral principles, then say so, e.g. "I too am on a fixed income and cannot afford to have my assessments raised too much every year." You should also evaluate the priority the opposition may place a particular value. While people may not want to see assessments raised, they may place more value on building an adequate reserve fund. When conflicts of value appear, try to focus on mutual interests and problems rather than on conflicting values. A focus on mutual interests can lead the way to resolution.

Conflicts of Interest

Often Board actions pit positive interests against negative interests. Members have a positive interest in gaining new benefits that they do not already have, such as building a second swimming pool in the community. Most members will support a proposal when it meets their positive interests. By comparison, members have a negative interest in losing benefits they presently claim. Not surprisingly, the loss of an existing benefit is considered to be significantly more important than the equivalent gain of a new benefit.

In addressing opposition based on a conflict of interest, the Board should attempt to couch its project or actions in terms of the negative interests which will be lost if the action or project is not completed.

Committees and Task Forces

Committees and Task Forces offer the Board good forums to address members' unspoken needs while accomplishing consensus-building and education. The key difference between a task force and a committee is the specificity of purpose and direction given by the Board. Committees are given less focused tasks and greater discretion. Task Forces are charged with specific tasks and asked to accomplish a specific goal. A combination of the two member participation formats allows the Board to break down responsibilities for a large project and to provide community members with a sense of participation and ownership.

Conclusion

Consensus building is a process of establishing a sense of "ownership" in a project or action which the Board wishes to accomplish. Without "ownership" in the proposed project or action, the Board may watch a key benefit or interest wither in the hands of the members' opposition. The various interests who make up your community are willing to suffer personal losses and hardships that may result from a plan or project - provided certain conditions are met:

- * Any interest who may suffer a loss (or perceived loss) from your project must feel that the problem it is addressing is an important problem.
- * The members must feel that you are the proper entity to be addressing the problem.
- * Your members must feel that you are going about resolving the problem in a sensible, appropriate way and that their concerns were taken into consideration. They must feel listened to.

- * Your members must feel that although they may be inconvenienced by the proposed course of action, that, on the whole, it is a "good" course of action and that it is better than doing nothing at all. (Null alternative)

The following four principles will act as a community "life preserver" when consensus is the only way to go:

1. There IS A SERIOUS PROBLEM - or an IMPORTANT OPPORTUNITY . . . one that just HAS to be addressed.
2. You are the RIGHT entity to address it, ... in fact, ... it would be IRRESPONSIBLE for you, with the MISSION that you have, not to address it.
3. The way you are going about it, i.e. the approach you are taking, is REASONABLE, SENSIBLE, RESPONSIBLE.
4. You ARE listening ... you DO care ... about the costs, the negative effects, the hardships that your actions will cause people.

Bibliography:

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