

# Dysfunctional Characters Often Sit at the Board Table



By Eileen Morgan Johnson

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## Board Chairs

**Dictator** — The Chair as Dictator does not believe in seeking advice or input from fellow board members, staff or consultants because s/he knows what is best for the nonprofit and will take action and then (sometimes) report to the board what has been decided or done. Board members are not allowed to express dissenting views and may be rewarded with or stripped of committee assignments or leadership positions depending on the whim of the Dictator.

**King/Queen** — The Chair as King or Queen will seek advice or input from fellow board members, staff or consultants and then make a pronouncement as to what will be done. Discussion among the board is “encouraged” but only up to a point. The remaining members of the board play the role of “counselors in waiting.”

**Machiavelli** — The Chair as Machiavelli is a strategist. You never can tell what the Chair is thinking or planning. S/he will consistently tell each and every member of the board members what they want to hear to gain their cooperation. S/he will occasionally pull the rug out from under members who have signed on as supporters. Board meeting discussions wander and often seem to be going nowhere until the Chair pronounces the “result” of the discussion. There is often a power play in the works, with the chair’s trusted spies and lieutenants deployed to plant information, secure support and report back.

**Playwright** — The Chair as the Playwright scripts out every possible scenario before the board meeting and assigns roles to those selected “players” on the board who can be counted on to play their roles and speak their lines. The Playwright sometimes becomes the Director when board members forget their lines or digress but s/he is fast on her feet and gets them all back on script. Committee chairs and officers are well rehearsed before they assume their duties and they frequently check in with the Playwright to ensure they are sticking to the script.

## Directors

**ED or CEO Wannabe** — The ED Wannabe wants the Executive Director's or CEO's job; she takes every opportunity to tell the chief paid staff member and the board that the ED is ineffective. S/he undercuts the ED with the rest of the board by comments and suggestive remarks that cast doubt about the ED's capabilities and performance without actually leveling any concrete charges or producing any evidence of poor performance.

**Skeptic** — The Skeptic doubts any statement made or report received from staff or consultants; he questions the mission statement, the vision and values document, the strategic plan, and all programs and budgets—not in a constructive way but with snide comments and cutting remarks. Anything done by a prior board is suspect. The Skeptic will sometimes abstain from key votes to avoid being on record. Doing so makes it easier for the Skeptic to later criticize board decisions.

**Expert** — The Expert tells her fellow directors how to do their jobs. She has an opinion on everything and is always the first one to speak up and express her views on any subject. She frequently dominates the discussion at board meetings and is quick to dismiss other directors' comments or opinions.

**Bomber** — The Bomber likes to throw a bomb during a board meeting and then sit back and watch what happens, delighting in the confusion that ensues. His goal is to not only disrupt the meeting but the board itself. Sometimes the reasons for the "bomb" are not apparent but in some cases it's because he wants to discredit other directors (most likely the chair).

**White Rabbit** — The White Rabbit is always late for board and committee meetings and generally fails to complete assigned tasks. She is always seems so busy that her fellow directors assume she must be doing something useful and of value to the nonprofit but no one really knows what that is. The White Rabbit can lead the board down various dead-end paths.

**Big Daddy** — Big Daddy is so well known in his home town (or state or region) that he has a rather inflated sense of his own importance. He shoots his mouth off whether the comments are pertinent or not and may need to step out of board meetings for important calls. He'll make sure everyone know when and why he has to step away. Big Daddy's mobile phone is the MOST likely to ring during a board meeting.

**Absentia** — Absentia doesn't make much of an impression on his fellow board members because he's never there. Although he sometimes signs onto conference calls no one can tell if he's dropped off. He won't give up his seat, there are no term limits, and for some reason he keeps getting re-elected.

**Historian** — The Historian has been around since the beginning of time and claims to recall every board decision as if it were made yesterday. The Historian can (and will) tell you why every new idea was tried before with disastrous results. She is the only member who tracks all of the unwritten procedures and policies of the nonprofit and can frequently be overheard saying "that's not how we do it," or "we've always done it this way," or "we tried that before and it didn't work."

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