

## Finding Agreement on Family Boards

Ten ideas to consider when foundation decision making becomes personally difficult

1. **Go back to legacy as a touchstone**

A clear statement of the donor's intent in establishing the foundation can be a guiding light, even without being rigid. Personal memories and affection for the donor can inspire cooperation, especially in the first few generations.

2. **Be courageous about confronting differences of opinion**

Sweeping differences under the rug, or assuming they will resolve themselves, is always a temptation. Differences of opinion, if they are substantive, should not cause damage to healthy family relationships.

3. **Communications outside the board room can be troublesome**

Even if family trustees are in the habit of frequent social contact, discussing foundation issues in twos or small groups outside the board setting can entrench positions, inflame fears of collusion, and accelerate conflict. Ideally, keep foundation issues in the foundation board room. At the very least, make sure communications are inclusive.

4. **Seek compromise solutions**

Be as clear as you can about what you favor, and why, and how much flexibility your position allows. Consider any solutions that will meet some of your needs while bridging to other people's favored solutions.

5. **Allow time for everyone to cool off**

Take a break if the group can't come to consensus and emotions are running high. It is most useful to have an identified time to re-convene and a plan of action; "we will take this up in two weeks after we speak to experts" is more constructive than "let's just table that."

6. **A neutral party can help you through**

Your board may not be able to go it alone. An outside facilitator may help articulate alternatives and broker decisions.

7. **If you don't have a mediator everyone trusts, you don't have a mediator**

If you are choosing a consultant, mediator or facilitator to help you through difficult decisions or relationships, all must buy in to the choice of that person. Without shared trust and assumption of neutrality and good faith, the mediator's work is doomed.

**8. Discretionary grants can be a safety valve**

Allocating a portion (usually a minority) of the grantmaking budget as a discretionary pool can permit the pursuit of individual trustees' interests without generating conflict. The best discretionary programs include clear rules, rigorous conflict disclosure, and full board sign-off on all discretionary grants.

**9. Deal openly—and officially—with conflicts of loyalty**

Many conflicts of allegiance, other than those prohibited by law, can trip up the interactions of a board. Define what conflicts of loyalty are important to the board, whether it includes board membership or active volunteering with an applicant organization, affiliation through friends, or personal financial contributions. Establish, and adhere to, a firm policy requiring advance disclosure, and abstention from voting in such cases.

**10. Consider the benefits of community trustees, not related to the donor, and not involved in family relationships**

Community trustees can bring a number of dimensions to a family-based foundation board: diversity, community knowledge, and content expertise. In addition, they usually do not carry the “baggage” of long-term family relationships, allowing their presence to ease sticky family dynamics and forge creative solutions to problems.

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