

Shur Fellow Guidance
August 2018
Leadership: Advocating for your Position

In last month's guidance we discussed board transitions and how to be an effective board member. Key tips included being prepared, being punctual, and being positive. A positive and collaborative attitude is important to forming helpful working relationships with your fellow leaders and performing the role of leader. However, there may come a time when being the voice of opposition and advocating for your position is unavoidable or even necessary. Few of us enjoy conflict, but when it arises from a place of wanting to do what's best and when it is done in a constructive way, it can be a tool in reaching a positive outcome.

The Abilene Paradox

It's a hot, windy, dusty afternoon, and four relatives are playing dominoes in the comfort of their own home. The father-in-law then suggests that the family take a trip to Abilene, a nearby town about sixty miles away. Everyone agrees without much resistance, and the family goes out in the miserably hot air, into a car with no air conditioning, and all the way to Abilene for lunch. When they arrive back home, it becomes evident that nobody had wanted to go to Abilene in the first place. They were all just trying to appease each other, so they avoided disagreement.

This paradox can apply to any setting in which groups are asked to make decisions. How do we create a space where questions can be asked, new ideas presented, and less traditional opinions can be voiced? Below are some tips on how to advocate for your position in a positive way.

The following is adapted from [For Small Nonprofits'](#) Advocating for Your Position:

Some people may have a hard time telling someone they "disagree" with them. It's just not in their nature. Others may be used to heated arguments and won't even register that there is real disagreement until someone's voice is raised. Different people approach conflict differently. Your fellow League members will have different ideas about how to conduct themselves during a disagreement or an argument than you do.

One idea that will help you present your ideas more clearly is starting them with the phrase "I feel" or "In my opinion." Using this construction, you are more likely to be clear about your idea and you are less likely to be seen as targeting someone else personally. In short, you have a better chance of being understood and heard.

Here are three statements from board members at the (fictional) Smallville Historical Society. Let's consider them and their alternatives. Do they sound familiar? What would be the equivalent in your committee meeting, board meeting or League?

Statement #1

"No way! Recent history is boring and no one cares about it. We need to stick to the exciting parts, like the early pioneers."

This dismisses someone else's feelings as irrelevant.

Alternatively: "I think that we should focus on the pioneer days, which has long been our focus, and not the entirety of Smallville's history."

Statement #2

"I don't know, Bob... with the way the finances are... and the reserves... what if...? I mean, if in five years something ... you know, changes at the state... Then where would the cabin be?"

This isn't clear at all. Bob might be able to parse it out, but he's just as likely not to know what you're getting at.

Alternatively: "I have to disagree, Bob. In my opinion, we are running a real financial risk by continuing to rely on the state grant for operation of the cabin."

Statement #3

"Do you think that if you looked at the committee report from the point of view of finances that you might see why it's obvious to everyone else but you that we need to raise our dues?"

Again, this belittles the person, but does it through the sneaky way of asking them a question. If you want to ask someone a question, ask them a question. If you want to advocate for an idea, advocate for an idea. Don't mix them up.

Alternatively: "Based on the report from the finance committee, I feel that we need to seriously look at raising fees to cover expenses."

A good exercise would be to work on other alternates to the above scenarios or consider a real-life scenario that happened recently, League related or otherwise. How was it resolved? What more helpful language could have been used?

Putting It Into Practice

With so many new members and engagers eager to take action with us, what can we do to create an environment in which all opinions can be heard?

There are a few simple steps –

1. Take the time to get to know those you are working with.
2. Ask questions.
3. Assume good intent.

One activity that could have long-lasting impact is to brainstorm some ground rules for engagement. This would allow for some conversation about the above, help to set a positive tone, and give a common framework or vocabulary to use if any challenges arise. These don't have to be a static list; they can be revisited periodically to see how they help to facilitate our work and to foster leadership.