

# Thoughts on Toxic (Nonprofit) Board Members

06.30.22 | Linda J. Rosenthal, JD



One of the nonprofit sector's most prolific and irreverent bloggers, [Vu Le](#) ("voo lay"), is at it again with his special brand of wisdom and guidance.

Just in time for the 4th of July, he has offered the philanthropy community a message of freedom; a roadmap to liberation for worthy organizations shackled by the destructive interference of one or more toxic board members.

## ***Plaquing and Sacking***

For a plan to shake off the oppression of such permanently planted mission-and-morale wrecking balls, see: [\*"Plaque and Sack": The art of getting rid of terrible board members while making them feel appreciated\*](#) (June 20, 2022) *Nonprofit AF Blog*.

Previously, Vu Le has discussed the issue of nonproductive and annoying board members; see most recently: [\*Board members, please check your egos at the door\*](#) (March 6, 2022). He has also mused about ways to deal with them; see – for instance – [\*"Does this board member spark joy?" How to tidy your organization using the KonMari method\*](#) (March 17, 2019).

The "plaquing and sacking" method is not a new idea. In its simplest form, it's the strategy of giving "problematic figures some public recognition, complete with a plaque or trophy of some sort...." and shoving them out the door before they figure out what's just hit them in the face. It "often works" because it plays to an overblown "sense of self-importance."

What Mr. Le is describing in his June 20th post, however, is a supercharged version of it, requiring meticulous and coordinated planning and a colossal dose of reverse psychology.

It's best reserved for directors whose "... unholy presence constantly threatens to open a gate for ancient god [Cthulhu](#) to enter this reality and cover the land in a thousand years of agony; who are so irritating and possibly destructive that you imagine a giant squid-faced being ravaging the world and

you think 'that might not be so bad.'”

This liberation formula requires that many people in the organization successfully “... suppress their bitterness and resentment” over having to publicly hail the plaque recipient: “In your speech before you hand the plaque over, make sure you call this board member a pillar. People love being called pillars. ‘Jeremy, you have been a pillar in our community and at our org.’ No need to mention he has been a rotting, half-termite-eaten stick of deadwood that everyone has had to tiptoe around.”

### ***Alternatives***

For suggestions in addition to (or other than) the Plaque and Sack method, there is guidance available with the click of a mouse in a Google search.

For instance, see [\*How To Fire A Toxic Board Member\*](#) by Joan Garry, long-time nonprofit consultant and professor at Penn’s Annenberg School for Communications. Over the years, she has seen many good board members and some bad ones as well.

Ms. Garry nixes the idea that she or anyone can list “ten easy steps that a board chair or a nonprofit CEO can follow to fire” a toxic board member. “The problem,” she explains, is that “... this board member is toxic. In fact, that’s the board member’s name. Toxic Board Member, or TBM for short....”

(After briefly distinguishing between the merely awful board member and the toxic one), she reveals that there are two options. The first, which happens only “in the most egregious of situations” is to secure a resignation. The second, more common, strategy is “managing the TBM out.”

See also, for example:

- [\*Don’t Let a Difficult Board Member Erode Your Nonprofit\*](#) Maureen K. Robinson, MassNonprofitNews [“The difficult board member—someone who acts like a black hole inside the organization, absorbing energy and good will—can be overcome if the board deliberately builds a culture of productivity, guards it carefully, and knows how to self-correct when problems materialize.”]
- [\*How to Deal With Difficult Board Members\*](#) (March 29, 2016) boardassist.org [“While often appealing, simply hoping things will improve over time, without taking action, is not a solution. The environment at board meetings will probably just get more negative. Worse yet, avoiding the issue may signal to other directors that this is acceptable behavior, creating more of what you don’t want. Not a good place to be....”]
- [\*3 Strategies for Handling a Divisive Board Member\*](#), Jeff Arnold, President, Leading Associations [Unlike the “difficult, but manageable, board members who create tension at meetings but generally don’t derail the work of the board altogether,” there are others who are “destructive, abusive, toxic and/or divisive,... and who must “go, either by resignation or removal....”]
- [\*How to Remove a Problem Nonprofit Board Member\*](#) (February 21, 2020) Joanne Fritz, thebalancesmb.com [“If a toxic person has gotten through, then there must be a concerted effort to either control the wayward board member or remove him or her from the board.”]

***Conclusion***

Lots to chew on over the long weekend. Happy Fourth of July from all of us at For Purpose Law Group!

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