

Dealing with difficult members



Have you ever wished that you could just throw a member out of your nonprofit organization? Some people are so challenging that we wish we could! Here are some tips for dealing with difficult members.

BYLAWS AND POLICY REGARDING DIFFICULT MEMBERS

In an ideal world, everyone goes along with the rules. In reality it doesn't always happen. It's a good idea to anticipate potential problems that you might have with difficult members. Include provisions for dealing with them in your bylaws, standing rules, and policies.

If you have adopted *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised, 11th edition*, the official and current edition of Robert's Rules, you already have measures in place to deal with difficult members. There are other parliamentary authorities as well, and they usually include some guidelines.

Even if you haven't adopted a specific parliamentary authority for your organization, the courts have found that the principles of parliamentary procedure apply to nonprofit organizations. So there is guidance—you are not starting afresh in this arena.

DIFFICULT MEMBERS AT CROSS PURPOSES WITH ORGANIZATION

One of the first principles about membership is that members are obliged to support the purpose and mission of the organization they belong to. If you have members who are taking actions that undercut the work of your organization, you can sanction them. See our article, [Sanctioning rogue board members](#), for a discussion of sanctions on boards. This will give you some idea of the sanctions you could apply to an ordinary member.

WHO'S IN CHARGE OF YOUR MEETING?

One important concept is sometimes a surprise to people new to parliamentary procedure. Ultimately, it is the group itself that is in charge of your meeting. The person running the meeting—president, chair, presiding officer, etc.—has to be strict on PROCESS but leaves the DECISIONS to the group.

We are so used to the leader as a “captain of industry” or a general leading their troops that we sometimes fail to grasp this vital concept. If you have a difficult member at a meeting, don't get into a power struggle between that person and the chair. The chair can always defer to the group as to what action should be taken. **See below for a sample script.**



DIFFICULT MEMBERS AT MEETINGS

When you hold meetings of your organization, it's a good idea to lay out the rules or guidelines for discussion and procedure at the beginning of the meeting. Perhaps your organization holds many meetings and has adopted standing rules. You can print them up and have them available for everyone.

If you don't have standing rules, the leadership can propose them for adoption at the meeting. You can adopt them in general, or for the specific meeting. It takes a majority vote of the members present and voting to adopt a standing rule (unless your bylaws specify a different standard).

Under Robert's Rules of Order, members present at a meeting must treat each other with courtesy and respect. They may not make inappropriate remarks. See our article, [Inappropriate remarks on nonprofit boards](#), for a list of inappropriate remarks. This guidance applies to general membership meetings as well as to board meetings.

It is essential for the leadership to be scrupulously fair in dealing with difficult members. Don't let your dislike, impatience or exasperation seep into your face, tone of voice, or behavior. Give each member exactly the same consideration. When you do this, other members will see and appreciate your commitment to principle.

See our article: [Can you kick a member out of a membership meeting?](#) for further ideas.

DIFFICULT MEMBERS WITH DIFFERENT IDEAS

Sometimes members who are perceived as difficult just have different ideas from the majority, or from the leadership! They have the same right to propose their ideas as anyone else. An effective leader will be thoughtful about this, and will keep personal animus separate from the proposals that difficult members make.

DIFFICULT MEMBERS ACCUSING THE LEADERSHIP

It is unpleasant when difficult members accuse the leadership of malfeasance. When I was serving as executive director of a national organization, one of the members accused me and the leadership of having misappropriated \$25,000. It was not a happy situation! A member proposed that a special committee be appointed to investigate the matter. Ten months later, we are all acquitted of any impropriety.

If you are the president and a motion attacking you is made, you should step down from the chair and invite the vice-president to preside during the treatment of the issue. Once that is resolved, you take the chair again.

Whenever a motion is made that refers only to the presiding officer in a capacity not shared in common with other members, or that commends or censures him with others, he should turn the chair over to the vice-president or appropriate temporary occupant during the assembly's consideration of that motion. Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised, 11th edition, p. 451

Your personal reaction is critical to handling accusations of any type. You must do your very best to remain neutral and to keep undue emotion out of your voice. It can be maddening to be in this situation, but you must not allow yourself to be maddened.

DIFFICULT MEMBERS AT BOARD MEETINGS

See our article, [What are rights of ordinary members at nonprofit board meetings.](#)

KICKING DIFFICULT MEMBERS OUT OF THE ORGANIZATION

In extreme situations, you may kick a difficult member out of the organization. Please check your bylaws and talk with your attorney before you take any action. As things now stand in our society, anybody can sue for any reason. You don't want to get involved in expensive lawsuits.

THE MEMBERS ARE ULTIMATELY IN CHARGE

When we invest effort and thought in our nonprofit endeavors, we feel ownership of the organization — and rightly so! That emotional commitment is an essential spring of action that keeps us volunteering, even when it is time-consuming, exhausting, or expensive. Nevertheless, we have to remember as leaders that the nonprofit belongs to its members, not to us. Ultimately it is the members who are in charge. We are their servants. Understanding this principle will save us grief and aggravation and keep us focused on the good of all.

SAMPLE SCRIPT FOR TURNING TO THE MEMBERS

Membership meeting of the ChitChat Club

Chair: *We will now break into small groups to consider the proposal to merge the ChitChat Club with the Friendly Society.*

Member A: *I don't like small groups. I think we should hold this discussion with everybody able to hear what everybody else thinks.*

Chair: *Since we have 100 members present, and our meeting is scheduled to finish in an hour, there may not be time to hear from everyone.*

Member A: *Oh, this is just an attempt by the leadership to marginalize me. You never want to let people hear what I have to say.*

Chair: *Very well, the chair will ask the group to decide this question. All those in favor of holding small group discussions, please say "aye."*

Members in favor: *Aye.*

Chair: *All those opposed to small group discussions, please say "no."*

Members opposed: *No.*

Chair: *The ayes have it and we will hold small group discussions, OR The noes have it and we will not hold small group discussions.*

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