

Put the gloves down

Keeping board meetings **civil**

Heated arguments were once common occurrences at **Spring Lake Township** (Ottawa Co.) board meetings.

Board members fought in public meetings so frequently that they regularly appeared in local newspapers. The outbursts bothered **John Nash** enough during his tenure as a trustee that when he ran for supervisor, he told citizens that if they voted for him, the fighting would stop.

Since then, Nash has made good on his promise. He channeled his 40 years of experience as a teacher and coach to educate board members and the public about the importance of peaceful meetings, and to correct them when he felt they were out of line. Today, their once-contentious meetings are marked by respect. If they make the papers, it's usually for something positive.

Keeping the peace still doesn't happen by accident, but Nash and the board members decided it's worth the effort. They've come to realize that they may not be best friends, but they have an obligation to keep it civil for the sake of their township.

"The thing is, you can express your opinion without screaming," Nash said. "What good does it do to get in somebody's face?"

No township board is expected to agree all the time. Debate and differences of opinion are characteristics of an engaged, effective board. It's when members cannot disagree respectfully that boards experience heated arguments, lengthy meetings and a tarnished reputation among the public.

Even the most embattled board isn't beyond hope, and you don't have to be a supervisor to make a difference. Any board member can decide to push for change and promote respect and civility.

What's in it for me?

Good behavior at board meetings has benefits more far-reaching than avoiding hurt feelings. Most boards make better decisions and are more effective when they're calm and collected at their meetings.

Terry Nienhuis, supervisor of **Holland Charter Township** (Ottawa Co.), prides himself on conducting short, to-the-point meetings twice a month, where the board efficiently moves through the agenda. His meetings aren't exciting enough to make many headlines, and he considers that a good thing.

"Board members like short meetings where we get business done," Nienhuis said. "At the end of the day, you can say that, even if it wasn't very exciting for the members of the press."

That picture changes any time negativity enters the boardroom. When tensions run high, board members waste time fighting among themselves and even with the public. Instead of trying to make the best decision for the citizens of their township, they try to win arguments. The focus is not on the job they were elected to do, and the township suffers.



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—John Nash, Supervisor
Spring Lake Township
(Ottawa Co.)

“When you get upset, you don’t do your best thinking or your best negotiating,” Nash said. “When you start getting upset, it becomes an ego issue. ... Data makes you think, emotion makes you decide.”

Contentious boards often have a poor reputation among township residents. Members of the public trust and have more respect for a peaceful board that listens to their concerns and appears open and honest. These boards may still attract angry public comments from irate citizens, but the difference is boards committed to civility can handle these comments calmly, without engaging or retaliating.

Media coverage is also more positive for boards whose meetings aren’t accented by angry outbursts. Without board member shouting matches to splash across the front page, newspapers write about township news and more positive happenings.

On top of all this, positive meetings are more pleasant for board members. They don’t dread going to meetings, and may be more willing to share their knowledge and experiences—helping the board make better decisions for the community.

Why do board members fight?

Board members don’t get to choose the men and women who serve next to them. When the Election Day results are in, members may find themselves serving with people who are fundamentally different from themselves.

Nancy Ohle, an organization development specialist and owner of Professional Training and Development Resources, said a frequent cause of board member conflict is a difference



This continuing education article and accompanying self-assessment are worth 2.0

elective credits in MTA’s Township Governance Academy. See page 27 for details.

OBJECTIVES

- To recognize the importance of civility among township board members
- To discuss methods, policies and practices to enhance positive relations on the township board, and with the public

CORE COMPETENCIES

- Communicates effectively
- Listens attentively
- Works effectively with individuals, departments and committees to achieve desired outcomes
- Understands how to be an active participant at board meetings and is knowledgeable about parliamentary procedure

cover story

in philosophies. For example, board members could have strong reactions when they're asked to consider amending the zoning ordinance to better accommodate a new type of use or business. While some members might like the business, others might be deeply opposed to it and don't want it in their community. These differences can cause arguments as board members aren't willing to compromise on something that goes against what they believe.

"That to me is where you get some of the instability," Ohle said.

Ohle sometimes sees tension between new board members and veteran members, who may be resistant to change. Other board members ran for their seat with a specific agenda they want to accomplish.

But in some cases, board members just don't like one another. Their personalities clash with another member who they never would have chosen as a friend outside of the board. As they sit together in meetings, it's hard not to let that conflict creep into their board discussions.

Rules of engagement

Peaceful meetings take intentional work. For many boards, their smooth, civil meetings are the result of behind-the-scenes negotiation.

In courses on effective board meetings, MTA recommends that boards adopt rules of engagement. (*See sidebar article on page 24 for sample rules of engagement.*) These rules should provide members with guidelines for etiquette, how they should talk to one another and how the board will make decisions. They also set expectations for how each board member should behave at meetings.

Rules of engagement are especially effective if the entire board agrees on them. Members are more likely to follow them if they helped develop the rules and share the vision.

The rules should be adopted into the board's written policy, then enforced consistently and fairly. Having rules of engagement on the books allows a board to diffuse difficult situations by focusing on the behavior, not the person. When a board member is out of line, the supervisor or fellow board



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member can say, "What you're doing goes against the rules we agreed to." Enforcing the behavior isn't just up to the supervisor. Any member of the board can respectfully remind their fellow board members that they are not following the rules of engagement.

Robert's Rules of Order and parliamentary procedure can also bring order to meetings and prevent the chaos that leads to contentious meetings. They create opportunities for discussion and offer a level of formality that helps contain bad behavior.

Jesus Yruegas, Mikado Township (Alcona Co.) supervisor, uses the rules to stop board members from discussing anything that isn't on the agenda. If a member brings up an issue during the meeting, Yruegas asks them to call the township clerk and ask that the issue be put on the next meeting's agenda. He's not afraid to tell members they're out of order if they don't return to the current meeting's agenda items.

Some boards may feel that traditional parliamentary procedure is too formal for their community. However, they should use caution. When meetings become too informal, the board loses some of its ability to stay in control.

Always be prepared

Nienhuis sticks to the motto that's guided the Boy Scouts of America for decades: always be prepared. He believes that if board members come to meetings with a thorough knowledge of the issues on the agenda, they're far less likely to argue with one another.

A few days before board meetings, members receive an information packet with the agenda and all the background documents needed to understand what they'll be discussing. They're expected to read every page thoroughly and call township officials if they have any questions. The goal is for



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all board members to come to meetings ready to discuss each agenda item intelligently.

The last thing Nienhuis wants is for board members to wait until they're at the meeting to start looking into the issues on the agenda. That lack of preparation leads to confusion, misunderstanding and arguments.

Instead, his board members have made it a habit to review the board packet before they sit down at their meetings. Nienhuis says this practice is the reason Holland Charter Township's board has a long history of peaceful meetings.

"It portrays a level of trust that we have in one another as a board and the knowledge about certain situations that we portray to the audience, so that we're not shooting from the hip," Nienhuis said.

The board as a whole can prepare for times of disagreement by deciding in advance what its priorities are. This could mean writing a mission statement that guides the board's focus. A unified understanding of the board's priorities can prevent members from having their own agendas that aren't necessarily in line with one another. Then, in times of conflict, the board can come back to the mission statement and see how it aligns with the issue they're debating.

Ohle recommends that board members prepare themselves for controversial issues by establishing criteria for how they will make decisions. For example, do you make decisions based on funding, urgency or responsiveness from the public? Setting your criteria in advance will provide you with a better defense if a board member or someone from the public questions you.

Preparing the agenda is also crucial. Agendas packed with discussion-heavy issues will inevitably lead to meetings that last three hours or longer. Experts agree that's far too long. No one is in their best state for making decisions after sitting in a meeting for hours, even if they've taken a break or two. Board members are more likely to lose their cool and argue when they're tired and frustrated.

A solution to this problem is limiting the number of agenda items that will involve lengthy discussion. If there are truly several issues that cannot wait, the board might consider conducting an additional meeting that month. The person preparing the agenda should also remember that the longer people sit and wait to talk about a controversial issue, the angrier they get. Hot-button topics should be placed near the front of the agenda to keep tensions from rising too high.

Talk it out

Nash knew there were some Spring Lake Township board members who did not support his election as supervisor. Before his first meeting as supervisor, he visited each board member at their homes and asked if they could talk.

"I said, 'I think we can do better than we've done in the past,'" Nash said. "I would by no means say we were bosom buddies after that, but the incivility ended."

Board members can follow Nash's example of proactively trying to avoid conflict. A public board meeting is not the

place for members to work out their personal differences. Instead of reacting to incidents or outbursts, board members should take the time to resolve their conflicts with one another.

Ohle recommends discussing this issue during a new board member orientation. This is a good time to make it clear that they're on the board to do a job, not to socialize with one another. You don't have to like your fellow board members, but you do need to show them respect.

Active listening

Board members will never agree on everything. It's how board members handle their disagreements that determines whether they lead to an argument or a respectful difference of opinion.

Listening should be the first response when board members disagree with another. Instead of immediately firing back with an angry retort, board members should calmly listen to what the other person is saying. Then, they should paraphrase back what they heard—before they state their opinion. Ohle calls this practice "active listening."

Board members who actively listen to one another not only have a better understanding of their fellow members' opinions, but they also show a greater respect for one another. It isn't an opportunity for board members to say, "I understand where you're coming from, but ..." Ohle tells

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Sample 'rules of engagement'

1. Only one meeting—no side conversations
2. All viewpoints are valid
3. Ideas generated first, evaluated later
4. Try to reach consensus—majority vote as last resort
5. Decisions will be supported by all members
6. Materials will be received in advance
7. Each member speaks for established period of time
8. Brainstorming—record all ideas
9. Manage war stories, off-track discussions
10. Intervene with tact—any group member can act

For more resources, visit MTA's "Meetings" and "Rules of Engagement" Web pages on the members-only section of www.michigantownships.org. After logging in, access via the "Index of Topics," under the "Answer Center" tab.

board members to eliminate the "but" and put a period on that sentence.

When board members think their point isn't getting across, they may make the same comments over and over again, frustrating other members. Many times, boards can avoid arguments if their members feel that they're being heard.

"I think a lot of people in their high school and college education learn public speaking skills; they learn how to verbalize well, but they don't learn the listening skills," Ohle said.

Listening does not always lead to agreement. Board members may stick to their side of an issue, even if they understand a dissenting board member's perspective. In this case, Ohle says board members should respectfully disagree. This means they understand and respect the other's opinion, they just don't happen to agree.

Be strong

All the good intentions in the world can't always prevent an outburst or argument. In those cases, the supervisor, or even another board member, should be prepared to stop them. This isn't a time to publicly embarrass a board member, which can lead to even worse behavior. It's about restoring order and preserving the integrity of the meeting.

Not every supervisor will have the same style for keeping order in the meeting. For some, a strong approach works best. When Nash first became supervisor, he stopped every angry flare-up immediately, before they could escalate. He wanted to change the mindset that shouting matches were acceptable in a public meeting, and using his gavel to stop conflict proved to be effective for him.

MTA training courses recommend calling a recess when a board member is out of line and taking that person aside to speak privately. Focus on the behavior, not the person, and explain to them that what they're doing is hurting their ability to have the board listen to them. For example, a supervisor could tell the member, "If you want the board on your side, this is not the way to do it."

Nienhuis sits down with board members for a one-on-one conversation if a board member is causing problems, though this rarely happens. He believes that if most board members buy into a culture of respect, the rest will follow suit.

"Eventually, they understand that this is the best way to run a meeting, the best way to treat the public and to get along with others," Nienhuis said. "Most people will conform to that."

Common courtesies

It's an old saying, but it rings true for board meetings: If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all. There's

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always a way to disagree with another board member without resorting to personal attacks and ugly words.

Board members can avoid arguments by consciously responding to each other's ideas in ways that aren't off-putting. Avoid using phrases such as "that won't work," or "that's a bad idea." Those phrases squelch constructive debate and discourage board members from sharing their thoughts in the future out of a fear that they'll be shut down.

Anyone who speaks at the meeting—whether it's a board member or someone from the public—should have the full attention of the board. Sidebar conversations look rude and give the appearance that you're not listening.

Public relations

Arguments at meetings aren't always started by board members. Sometimes, contentious members of the public come to meetings with civility far from their minds. Township officials agree the best way is to establish a procedure for how your board will handle public comments. Then, that procedure must be enforced consistently, not just for the people who agree with the board.

The law requires that all public meetings provide an opportunity for public comment. Public bodies are allowed to establish rules for the public comment period, such as guidelines for the time and place. However, the subject matter can't be restricted beyond banning personal attacks that are unrelated to a person's governmental function.

A board may place limits on how long individuals can speak during public comment; many boards use two or three minutes. Supervisors, as meeting moderators, should keep in mind that the time limit must be enforced the same way for everyone. Speakers shouldn't be cut off just because the board doesn't like what the person is saying. While the time each speaker may talk can be limited, the time provided for the one public comment period mandated by the Open Meetings Act cannot be limited by board rules. If 100 people want to speak, they must be given the opportunity to do so. Board rules can offer the option of a group appointing a spokesperson to represent them if several people are all there to speak on the same subject, including providing the spokesperson additional time to speak.

Generally, townships set a time for public comment, typically at the beginning or end of the agenda, or even both. Boards could also choose to allow comments after agenda items. The timing must make sense for the board as well as the public—for example, if comments are restricted to the end of the meeting, the public would not have a chance to potentially impact the board's vote.

Ohle recommends posting the rules for public comment in the room where board meetings are conducted. "If the rules are posted, people tend to follow them," she said.

Public comments at meetings become more positive when the board actively works to keep residents engaged. Ohle encourages boards to put citizens on committees, gather them into focus groups and involve them in strategic planning. During meetings, boards can use visual aids and



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flip charts when discussing complex issues to help the public understand, and write down residents' ideas.

Keeping the public informed helps to prevent misunderstandings and promote positive interactions.

"If you go to them and involve the public, it sets the stage for a civil dialogue," Ohle said.

Handling a controversy

Procedures for public comments become especially important when the board handles a controversial issue. People don't usually attend meetings when they're happy with what the township is doing—they are much more likely to show up when they're angry. When residents attend meetings to vent their frustrations, Ohle has one piece of advice—let them. As long as they are speaking during the appropriate time, sticking to the time limit and avoiding personal attacks unrelated to governmental functions, the board cannot lawfully prevent them from speaking.

Listen to the person speaking to show them respect, and you might even be able to find a solution to their problem. Yruegas uses the public comment portion of Mikado Township meetings as an opportunity to educate the public. He directs residents to the appropriate township officials who can take care of their problem, or he explains why the township can't take a certain action. Once, a large group attended a meeting to complain about an issue that turned out to be rooted in a misunderstanding. Yruegas cleared up the misunderstanding right then and there. The residents were happy, and he avoided a public argument.

Board members should remember not to retaliate or engage a person who is looking to start a fight. Except for calmly correcting false information, members should limit their response to simply saying, "Thank you for your comment." This same concept could also be applied to angry letters to the editor in the newspaper, or comments on social media.

cover story

Sometimes, this takes great restraint, Nienhuis said. “It requires a certain amount of thick skin,” he said. “You have to try not to take things personally. And that’s hard sometimes.”

That’s not to say that the board should completely ignore angry residents. Nienhuis sometimes meets one-on-one with residents who have a problem, just as he meets with other board members.

When a member of the public is clearly out of order, the board needs to enforce its rules. Nash sticks to Spring Lake Township’s rule of public comments being made at the beginning of the meeting. If someone tries to speak outside of the designated period, he tells them they’re out of order. That applies even if he agrees with what the person is saying.

“You can’t silence the people you want to, and let the people who support you talk, because that is very easily seen through,” Nash said. “Consistency is always a huge factor.”

Don’t expect perfection

Boards with the best of intentions can’t expect every meeting to be conflict-free. Incidents can happen, even after your board decides to make a conscious effort to have civil meetings.

In those moments, your board should remember its purpose. Your job as an elected official is not to accomplish your individual agenda or promote your ideas over other members. Your purpose is to accomplish your township’s business and serve the residents. That’s something all board members can agree on, no matter how different you might be.

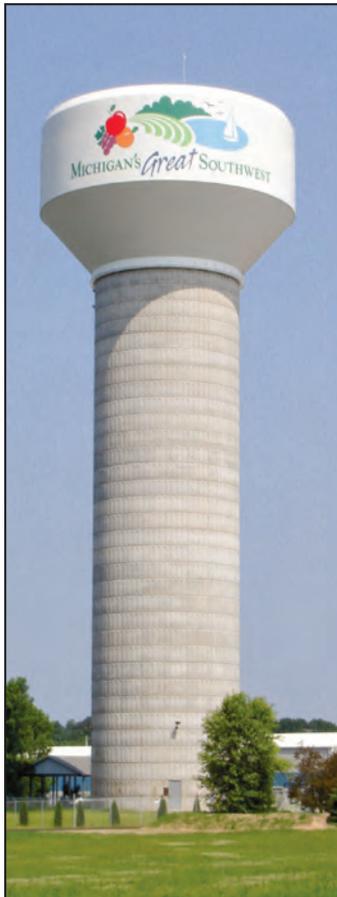
Township meetings can attract impassioned speeches and controversy. In Nienhuis’ mind, that’s part of what makes this form of government truly great.

“This is township government. It’s local government at its best,” Nienhuis said. “People don’t have to travel to Lansing or Washington, D.C., to be heard. They just come over to their township office because they want to speak. I think that’s why most of us serve.”



Bethany Mauger, MTA Staff Writer

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