

# Bridge the Great Divide

By Julie Adamen



(Note: This article was originally written for and published by New England Condominium Magazine. It is intended to be read by all in the industry: service providers - including managers - and Board members alike.)

**B**oard members and service providers are intrinsically tied to each other, having the symbiotic relationship of need and need fulfillment. Everyone working towards the betterment of community associations while making a reasonable living providing that service. Seems like a match made in heaven, right? Well, in our business, sometimes it doesn't work out that way. Although things may start out just fine where everyone is on the same page, the relationship between service providers and Board members can grow contentious as time goes on because Board members don't realize how their actions (or lack thereof) affect their relationship with their vendors. Make no mistake, a good working relationship with a service provider is not confined to the fact that you pay your bill on time (though that helps), but is predicated upon trust and mutual respect.

When there is a loss of that trust mutual respect the relationship begins a natural progression downward. Each party becomes suspicious of the other, their motivations and their abilities. The relationship then settles in to an "Us v. Them" attitude. This attitude is what I call The Great Divide. Board Members v. Service Providers.

If you have been a Board member or a service provider you probably know exactly what I am talking about. So, let me take a moment to examine some of the most prevalent reasons The Great Divide happens. Our review in this article will be focused on some of the breakdowns that occur within the operations of the Board of Directors. And lest you think I am writing strictly from a service provider stand point - I am also a Board member on my homeowner's association and have seen all of these first hand from both sides of the fence. We will focus on the breakdown within the realm of the service provider in a subsequent article.

## Lack of Civility

Although a lack of civility seems to permeate

our society at every level (note this past Presidential election), most of us wouldn't dream of treating the people we work with, live with or socialize with in the manner that many Board members treat their service providers (and, at times, their homeowners). For some reason, many Board members feel that acting towards others in a less than civil manner - which sometimes deteriorates in to downright rudeness, or even slander or libel, is an acceptable practice.

I have experienced Board members yell, pound the table, put the service provider on the spot with inappropriate questions, publicly denigrate a staff member or another Board member (or homeowner), revisit dead issues just for the fun of nitpicking and generally making a hobby out of making others miserable. I never have figured out the "why" of this behavior, but I have seen it up close and personal as a manager and as a Board member. Experience tells us that this type of behavior doesn't work in the long run, and that problems need to be reviewed and discussed in a civil manner for there to be any hope of rectifying those problems. Conducting business in this fashion also earns respect - and authority - for the Board.

Let's stop, take a breath and treat each other the way we would like to be treated. A lack of civility is often the first step in creating The Great Divide between Board members and service providers.

## Maintain Business Hours

Let's face it: neither Board members nor service providers are at their best when, after a long day at the office or in the field, they must attend a Board meeting that may go on past 10 or 11 pm. And the fact that Boards continue to insist on meeting at night (instead of meeting at, say, 4pm) is deleterious to the Board, the service providers, and ultimately, the homeowners.

Can holding Board Meetings during regular business hours foster better relations with your service providers? The answer is a resounding YES, because it shows that you respect your service providers as business people. Business hours are when business should be conducted. It shows respect for your service provider's time, which is respect

for them as a professional in their field. Plan your meetings earlier - Think late afternoon or early morning.

(I do not lay the blame for this practice this solely at the feet of Board members. Management companies that continue the practice of allowing clients to keep their staff out till 10 or 11pm several nights per month are just as much, if not more, to blame for than Board members.)

## Professional Recognition

Another creator of The Great Divide is the fact that service providers - and especially management service providers - are often not given credit by their Boards for being professionals in their field (and you would be surprised to find how many service providers - from landscape contractors to management staff - are degree individuals, and/or are considered forensic experts by the court). Board members often treat these individuals as nothing more than a glorified secretary or gopher who's opinion means little and just gets in the way of the direction the Board wants to head.

People who provide services to associations, especially if they have been around awhile, do this job because they good at it and they know their stuff. You wouldn't attempt to tell your dentist that you knew what was better for your teeth - because, well, you've had teeth all your life so you must know as much about them as he or she does. So, respect your service provider's professional ability and think twice before telling them their job, or dismissing their recommendations out of hand. To quote a friend of mine, "You don't know what you don't know." Giving your service providers credit where credit is due - in recognition of their professional ability, is another way to keep The Great Divide from forming in the first place. If you find you cannot respect them as professionals, then you may need find different service providers that meet your expectations.

(And a word to service providers: Remember, as you present yourself and your services, so shall your client treat you.)

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#### Accept of the cost of doing business.

Another maker of the Great Divide is the continual harping by Board members about the cost of their service provider's contracts and extras after contracts have been negotiated and signed. Now, Board members asking good questions in a polite manner about expenses and the causes thereof are one thing. But sending angry and emotional emails, making nasty phone calls, or being personally confrontational about sprinkler parts, copy charges, time sheets, hourly rates or what have you - are not going to change those costs. Fuel costs rise, insurance costs rise, labor costs rise - and if you think your service providers are not going to have to pass it on to their clients, you are living in a fantasy world. And after months of this type of insidious behavior, your staff or service providers start becoming defensive because the message you are sending to them is this: **YOU DON'T TRUST THEM.**

People don't want to work for people who don't trust them. They become resentful. And the Board member(s) become even more distrustful. The only end to the cycle is both a

review and adjustment of the association's oversight system, or installation of a new Board or new service provider or staff member. What a waste of time and energy on everyone's part. Let's bridge the gap by fixing the real problem, and move on.

#### Be Productive!

Your service providers work very hard for your community, and probably many others. They have several other Board meetings to attend besides yours in the coming month. So, let's respect everyone's time, work and contribution and by being when we come to meetings. Let's have our agendas, prioritize our issues and diligently get to business, all the while moving forward and following our agenda. Board meetings are for making decisions on behalf of the corporation, not for venting, socializing or philosophizing. Being productive at those meetings shows respect for your service providers, yourselves and your community and goes a very long way towards bridging The Great Divide.

These are just a few of the things Boards can do the Bridge The Divide that can form between them and their service providers. Most of them are really quite simple, and to be fair, most Board members probably don't

realize the impact of these seemingly small ways to keep relations from souring. The pool of service providers is not infinite, and they do talk to one another. If your association becomes undesirable to work for, pretty soon everyone knows about it, and no one really wants to work with you anymore, no matter how much money you have.

Your service providers are there to do just that, provide a service. And though your association is non-profit, the service provider is not, nor do you want them to be. When Board of Directors recognize that their service providers are professionals, with many years of experience in many associations, and treat them as such through civil discourse, acceptance of the normal cost of doing business, mutual trust and respect, those service providers will be there for you and your community through thick and thin.

And again... In case you think I'm going to only focus on the Board member end of things, think again. Check in the coming months for how service providers can Bridge the Great Divide.

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#### Substandard or out of specification materials.

Unfortunately, substandard material usage isn't always immediately evident to a Board of Directors. It might take months, or years, for a Board to figure out that the roofer they contracted with in good faith five years ago (and is now out of business) used defective roofing products (purchased at a discount!) which, five years later, have a failure rate of 80%. Ouch. This short-term profit to the service provider has caused long-term fear for the consumer and the Board now views the service provider as one of "them."

**Poor communication.** Many service providers are very, very good at what they do, yet aren't so good when it comes to communicating with the Board and/or their representatives. Communication problems come most commonly in two forms: written and oral. Written failures start with poorly written proposals, poorly thought out and written e-mail, un-clear billing, and less-than-literate written responses to queries by the Board or homeowners. Poor oral communication can range from unanswered or continuously busy office phone lines, no

voicemail, and no or untimely response to voicemails, pagers or email. From the service provider's point of view - they often feel that their work "speaks for itself," and they don't really need to be readily available to the Board once they start the job. Well, unfortunately, some times the work does speak (negatively) for itself and that's why a member of the Board, or their staff, needs to find the service provider. Now. Poor communication creates a gap in trust.

As a service provider, if your communication skills are weak, know this is something you must improve. If for some reason you are unable, or unwilling, to work on this, make sure someone on your staff is at the ready to answer the phone, send emails or write those letters or bids. Good communication skills go a long way towards obtaining and retaining contracts with community associations and their Boards of Directors. Good communication creates a feeling of openness and honesty, and tells the Board that you respect and trust them enough to be there when they need you, and to be upfront about challenges you may be having. This in turn allows the Board to place more faith in the service provider.

As the old saying goes, "it takes two to tango." In the community management business, those two are Board members and those who provide services. Each needs the other. Service providers need to sell their services or products, and Board members need those services or products to effectively manage and protect their investment within the communities.

How can service providers, if not avoid completely, at least mitigate the loss of trust and mutual respect that often occurs between you and Board members? In a nutshell, get the information needed to bid jobs accurately and to the best of your ability, have the appropriate infrastructure to handle the job, provide the service as defined by contract. Last, and often most important the service provider must have open, accurate and timely communication with the Board and/or its staff. These simple affirmative actions go a long way in creating a relationship with that Board that will be built on trust and respect.

Bridging the Great Divide is that simple.

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**What can you do?** The decision making process is sufficiently complicated in the first place to bedevil academics; the no-decision making process is equally complicated. The process could be likened to what goes on in a black box: A mystery too complicated to quantify? Maybe. There are books aplenty on how to make a good decision, but getting your supervisors or Boards to make a decision? Not so much. If a decision is yours to make and you feel it is too overwhelming, seek help from a mentor, apply some of the techniques for successful decision making, and look at the

root cause for your inability to decide. If the decision is not yours to make, unfortunately, there is not a whole lot you can do other than remove your personal feelings from the equation.

Unfortunately for us, a few of those no-decision makers were just re-elected to the Board, and, well, you understand, don't you?

**Footnotes:** 1. Sadan, Elisheva (1997) Empowerment and Community Planning: Theory and Practice of People-Focused Social Solutions. Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishers (in Hebrew). Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz introduced the no decision-making in 1970 as a theory for controlling

discussion. This is a critique of Robert Dahl's assumption of pluralism in decision making, where all interests are represented by an open process. Thus Bachrach and Baratz contend that no decision-making is an overt strategy to control power.

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# Bridge the Great Divide

## Part 2

By Julie Adamen



In a previous article, I wrote about how and the relations between Board members and their service providers can, and often will, become contentious. From the service provider point of view, be they management, legal counsel, landscape contractor or the myriad others called upon to service community associations, it all boiled down to a lack of trust and mutual respect between the service provider and the Board. That lack of trust and mutual respect is what I call "The Great Divide," or Board members v. Service Providers.

This time, we are turning the tables and looking at The Great Divide from the Board member point of view: From where they sit, what causes a lack of trust and respect between them and their service providers? Let's take a look at some of the most common breakdowns that occur on the part of the service providers that create the Great Divide.

**Contract bidding without all pertinent information.** Service providers should request and receive all the information necessary for them to bid the job. The bid scope and specifications should be in writing, and are normally called a Request for Proposal, or RFP, and the community requesting the service provides it. Service providers who fail to ask for this document, or are not provided one and bid anyway, often find out the hard way that once they are awarded the contract, all kinds of not-so-obvious, hidden additional services or materials specifications are required that they hadn't thought of when they bid the job. The service provider comes to the stunning realization that they bid the job too low.

If this has happened to you as a service provider, you know the sickening feeling in the pit of your stomach. The job you just got is actually going to cost you money. And now you either have to suck it up or go back to the Board of Directors and confess your mistake, get out of the contract, or raise the price and hope they bite. This one critical error of not obtaining the right information when you were asked to bid the job opens the Great Divide between you and the Board: No matter what the reason, you, the service provider have broken a trust before you started by pulling what appears to be a "bait and switch," all because you failed to get all the pertinent information to bid the job right in the first

place.

**Low-balling the bid.** Through ignorance or a deliberate act, many a job in the community association industry is bid too low, even with an RFP.

Those vendors provide service on fixed asset/infrastructure work are often able to calculate with some measure of certainty what a job will cost. For example, an asphalt contractor measures the actual road surface and then knows it will take X number of worker's X amount of time to spread X square feet of slurry seal. The seal itself will cost X. There will be 15% waste. Profit must be X, or said asphalt contractor will not make any money on the job. Obviously, I have simplified the process, but this type of service is one that the provider can get their arms around in terms of bidding through relatively easily acquired empirical data. If the job is bid too low, either the contractor was hung over, dumb, something happened which he couldn't predict (i.e., an act of God, a sudden increase in material cost, etc.) or he just plain forgot to add something in.

Or, the bid was a true low-ball because the service provider was trying to get the job and figures they can skimp somewhere, or have sufficient "extras" to make the profit. This practice almost always comes back to bite the contractor, the Board, or both.

Service providers who provide a universal service to associations (example: management companies) one in which all types of services are provided for (virtually) one price don't THINK they have the same type of empirical data that fixed asset/infrastructure contractors maintain, so these types of providers have a tendency - a big tendency - to underbid the job. To these universal service providers, I submit that you can and should be bidding your contracts with a base of contractually defined services with additional services provided on a time and material or fixed fee per item basis even if it must be in the guise of a full service, universal contract. It might take more time to put together this type of proposal, but if the provider is awarded the contract, it will have been worth their time and effort as they are sure their firm will be appropriately compensated for the services provided. The bottom line here is simple. An accurately bid job keeps the relationship between the Board and the service provider on a far more even keel. The provider can fulfill the terms of the

contract for the price of the bid. Most reasonable Boards don't ask for more than that.

**Lack of appropriate service infrastructure.** "Get the contract and then we'll worry how to do it!" is the adage of many service providers. Service providers who make this statement while maintaining a viable, functioning company with a full staff are one thing. The nightmare for associations and their Boards is the contractor who bids the job, looks good, talks good - yet unbeknownst to all is a small company with a small staff insufficient to undertake the job. The Board thought - and may have been told - one thing, yet the reality turns out to be far different. Not only has this contractor broken his trust with the Board, he has inadvertently made the Board distrustful of the next several service providers with which the Board must work.

**Having untrained or unqualified staff.** Another huge issue between Boards and service providers occurs when the provider staffs the project with inappropriate personnel - be it painting, roofing, management or what have you. The Board isn't comprised of painters or experts in the services, and once they figure out there is incompetence, they feel they have no choice but to monitor every little thing going on, resulting in every service provider's nightmare: a micromanaging Board. And having that untrained or unqualified staff often leads to....

**Substandard or out of specification work-product.** The job is done, or the job is ongoing, depending on what type of service has been or is being provided. It's just that it's not very good. Maybe the painting was sloppy. Maybe the collections weren't followed up on time. Maybe the lawn didn't get mowed this week. Maybe the Board has been waiting for a legal opinion that finally shows up - with the name of the association spelled wrong and omitted issues. Whatever it is, it's substandard and not to contract or agreed upon specifications. And it makes Boards crazy, as they contracted in good faith. This loss of trust affects not only that particular service provider, but like it or not it affects every other service provider existing, and to come. It's eroded trust, and a loss of respect.

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