



## Village Board Orientation Information

The following are excerpts from various Board/Administration training sessions. I think there are many good ideas worth reviewing.

This information is intended to provide a common base understanding about what it takes to be an effective Board member, and why the Board should care that each member is effective. The outline below highlights the key items, but does not attempt to thoroughly cover everything.

**Board as a Team:** Board members were elected to a Village Board, not to some independent seat. Constituents, although they are diverse, have a right to expect the Board to function effectively as a team. There is sometimes a perception by Board members that they need to be independent to the point of being contrary on every issue. There is also a fear about being perceived as a “rubber stamp” Board. A Board member can and should feel comfortable in expressing diverse opinions, and in arguing a point. The key is to show respect for fellow Board members, to be willing to move ahead once the issue is thoroughly discussed, and to live with the results of the vote.

**Board as Individuals:** Each Board member provides a unique perspective, and has his or her own areas of interest. This is only natural and the areas of interest should not be repressed. What makes government special is the diversity of the Board members. It is important for Board members to understand fellow member’s perspective, and may allow a Board member to take the lead on issues within his or her areas of interest. The best Board is one in which Board members have strong individual identities, yet work effectively as a team.

**Constituent Requests:** Once elected, a Board member rarely meets anyone who will admit to not having voted for him. Board members will frequently receive requests that seem on the surface to be very reasonable. In most cases, the Village staff can resolve the constituents’ problem. Typically the Board members will hear only part of the story, and what seems to make sense, doesn’t. The main thing is to get the basic information from the person making the request. The constituent can assume then that you or someone will get back to them within a day. Depending upon the complexity of the request, a Board member can pass it on directly to a department head, or to the Administrator.

The key to a constituent request is to be specific in what the Board member will do, i.e., promise a timely response, look personally at the problem etc., while avoiding a commitment to “fix anything”.

**Board Commitments:** A Board member should never attempt to speak for the entire Board, particularly outside Board meetings. It’s inappropriate to promise that the Board will do something until the Board as a group has a chance to discuss it.

**Balance:** The single most difficult job of a Village Board is to balance diverse interests and search for common interest. It is easy for a Board member to react to groups in isolation without considering the larger consequences of his or her actions. For example, a senior group may request that more hours in the recreation center be restricted for adult use. Before responding to solve their problems, it is important to at least consider who else might be affected. While this seems like common sense, it is too often overlooked in the decision making process. It is very important to recognize and consider citizen input, but it is equally important to develop perspective. If ten people call on an issue, in a Village of 12,000 people, is it indicative of a landslide public concern, or a well organized phone campaign? When someone tells a Board member that “everyone in the Village feels this way” it is important for him to trust his own judgment and seek a few more opinions. A Board can seldom do everything that everyone wants, but it should try to do most of the things that most people need.

**Committee Traps:** Committees can serve a useful purpose in taking an in depth look at an issue, or providing an outside perspective. Village Board should avoid the trap, however, of referring everything to a committee for further study and review. If the Board has most of the information it needs to decide, then decide. They should not use committees to avoid having to make tough decisions. It will make the Board appear weak and indecisive, and will eventually cause a backlog in the decision-making process. At a certain point there is a diminishing value to the additional input.

**Election Traps:** A Board is occasionally inclined to refer tough issues to the voters. In rare instances this is appropriate. However, in most cases the Board needs to make the tough decisions. This is a representative form of government rather than a democracy. The voters elect representatives (Board members) to make informed decisions. If an issue seems too tough for the Board, it is unlikely that the voters will make a better informed decision.

**Leaders Versus Messengers:** Board members need to be leaders, not just the messengers for their constituents. It is necessary and appropriate for Board members to inform the Board of the concern and opinions of their constituents. However, a Board member also needs to educate constituents and help them understand the bigger picture. On some issues, a Board member may need to take a leadership role contrary to the views of her constituents. For example, even if a majority of constituents wanted to discriminate on the basis of race, age or sex, it would not be right to do so.

These issues will not arise often, but it is important to remember that the great leaders took risks and led their constituents rather than followed them.

**Process Versus Product:** It is important to balance the value of public input and discussion in meetings with the value of decision making. It is important to allow adequate time in meetings for public input and Board members discussion. It is also important to keep things moving so that every item on the agenda receives equal attention. If the board allows repetitive public comment or prolonged Board discussion on early agenda items, it shortchanges the later items. Good decisions are seldom made after midnight.

**Conflict Management:** It is natural to be intimidated by large, angry crowds. It is important that the Board maintain control in these situations, and require basic rules of courtesy. It is important that Board members do not get sucked into emotional confrontations, and lose sight of what the issue at hand is. If necessary, allow time for cooling off. The President should maintain a quick gavel, and not allow any personal attacks by the audience.

**Don't Grandstand/Posture:** A simple example of grandstanding is a Board which must implement an EPA-mandated program or face a crippling fine. After a thorough review of the requirements and exhausting all alternatives, the Board is due to vote on the issue. The majority of the Board votes affirmatively. One member, after assessing that the votes are there to implement the program and avoid the fines, makes a grandstand speech to the audience about the evils of big government, drawing applause from the audience and the perpetual animosity of fellow Board members. An effective Board member works quietly to do their homework and makes reasoned arguments to their fellow Board members. A grandstander makes posturing statements to the audience. The most effective way to deal with this behavior is to publicly confront it in the meeting.

**Monday Night Tunnel Vision:** There is a tendency for Board members to base their entire perceptions of how the Village operates by what happens on Monday nights at Village meetings. It is important to keep in perspective that the Village staff provides hundreds of different services to thousands of citizens everyday. Difficult problems come up and are resolved. Customers are treated with courtesy and respect. While the issues discussed Monday nights at Board meetings are important, keep them in context with the entire operation.

**This Too Shall Pass:** During times of conflict, it is hard not to take problems home for a sleepless night or two. While not diminishing the seriousness of these issues, keep in mind that they will fade away to be replaced by other issues. Can you remember the conflicts you were dealing with three months ago? At the time they may have seemed insurmountable, today they are probably a dim memory. The key is to keep positive and humorous perspective, and not give yourself ulcers.