

The Rogue Member: Dealing With Adversity in the Board Room

By Michael T. Adamson

Rogue - An unprincipled, deceitful, and unreliable person [*American Heritage Dictionary*]

If anyone believes that the dictionary definition of a rogue sounds a little harsh, try substituting more familiar terms, such as undisciplined, unethical, or not a team player. Regardless of which term is ultimately used to describe this member, the board, beset by a rogue member, usually has a few other descriptive adjectives that are best left to the imagination.



Seriously, there is seldom anything more disruptive to board governance than the member who refuses to operate within the accepted guidelines of the board. Fortunately, there are only a few rogue members who plague school boards across the state during anyone term, but that in no way minimizes their effect, not only on their local boards, but to the public's perception of school boards in general.

It is important to distinguish a disgruntled board member from a rogue. Disgruntled members usually recover from whatever is causing their discomfort; they move on for the greater good of the board and the school corporation. However, rogue members are preoccupied with one-upmanship and/or getting even. With rogue members, it is seldom about right or wrong, rather, it is about winning at all costs.

What makes the rogue a rogue?

Rogues are those members who frequently operate beyond any legal authority, using implied authority to bully and intimidate the school administration, staff, and the public. It is not uncommon for the rogue to push a personal agenda that is sympathetic to special interest groups with whom he or she may have ties officially or unofficially within the community or school corporation. The rogue is a board member who often refuses to support majority decisions of the board and works both openly and subversively to disrupt and undermine board authority when majority decisions conflict with his or her own interests or preferences.

The rogue may be a micro-manager, interfering in the day-to-day operations of the school corporation, but not necessarily. The rogue, in spite of an often over-inflated opinion of his or her abilities and contributions to school governance, may be very convincing and, while rogues truly have no allies, they are not above seeking temporary alliances that will further personal agendas. Consequently, other board members are either with them or against them.

As the definition implies, the rogue member does not subscribe to a code of ethics, favoring taking whatever actions further the cause at hand. Rules are made to be broken, especially when the rules hedge the rogue's agenda.

How does the rogue get seated?

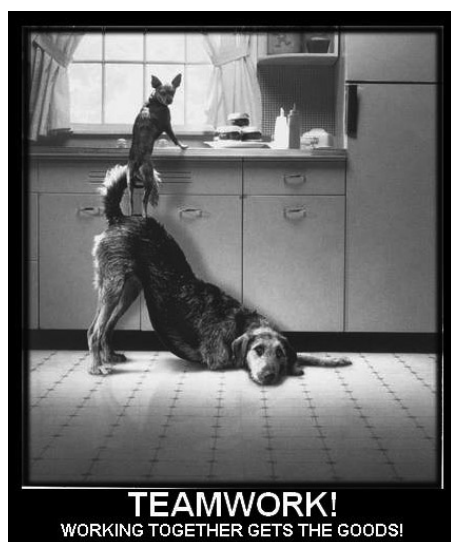
This person typically finds his or her way to the board following a period of community unrest originating from some controversial issue in the school district. An issue may stem from athletic disputes, unsettled

teacher contracts, failed or passed building projects, and so on. The rogue often appears to be very informed and have strong opinions on these types of controversial issues, and he or she usually manipulates and/ or capitalizes on any community unrest surrounding the matter. It is important to note that these members are not elected with their community's knowledge that they are rogues, but instead because they are well-respected individuals in their communities. They are often seen as individuals who can get things done or someone who effectively captures the trust and confidence of others. Another perception is that they can successfully usher in corporate leadership changes.

While rogue members usually find their seats during or following periods of unrest, often a very vocal minority ultimately gives them an election edge. With voter turnouts typically pitifully low during both primary and general elections, any special interest group that mobilizes their followers can affect election results.

What do you do with a rogue?

Once seated, there is nothing legally that can be done, unless the board member violates some element of the oath of office sufficiently to persuade the court to remove him or her for failure to perform the duties of their office. Otherwise, unless they move out of the district, commit a felony, resign, or die, you are stuck with them.



Although the board may have to tolerate the rogue member, a passive approach seldom improves the situation. Appealing to a rogue member rarely persuades that member to change his or her tactics, and they will utilize the board's reluctance to stand up to their antics to their advantage.

One thing is certain: ignoring the problem will not improve the situation. Without immediate steps to abrogate the problem, it will only escalate and do more harm by undermining the leadership of the board and stifling the forward momentum of education in an entire school corporation.

Compacts are an essential first step

Adopting a board compact that reasonably defines the operating procedures and extent of the board's authority is a good place to begin to mitigate the effects of the rogue member's activities. The strength of a compact is that it appeals to the individual's sense of ethical behavior. However, the process of adopting this document is what actually gives it such a strong ethical bite.

The compact should be specific enough to discourage the rogue's behavior and, once developed, it should be adopted in an open session of the board. Following the adoption, all board members, attesting to their willingness to follow the guidelines contained in the compact, should sign it. The public signature and the recording of the event in the official meeting minutes are critical. A board member will be less likely to violate the elements of a compact, especially when his or her signature is affixed to it.

Although undertaking a process of developing and adopting a board compact is a reasonable reaction to attempting to mitigate less-than-desirable board behavior, the best preventative measure to address

those undesirable traits may be to adopt a compact when there are no issues. Calm waters always provide a better atmosphere to discuss the board's expectations of its members.

Containment is the best solution

If the rogue member chooses to ignore a compact or other agreement and continues to pose a problem for the rest of the board and/ or administration, then the remaining board members must take action to minimize the disruptive behavior. This means redefining the rogue's circle of influence. This is accomplished by giving the rogue's comments and suggestions only perfunctory consideration, never elaborating or allowing him or her opportunities other than those for which they are legally entitled. Additionally, strictly adhering to the board operating practices and procedures outlined in an adopted board compact will effectively curtail the rogue's ability to grandstand.

However, it is important to understand that containment does not mean ignoring the rogue. Even the most cantankerous board member is prone to moments of brilliance. Do not deny good ideas or input because of from whom it comes. The goal of containment is modification of behavior, much like a child's timeouts.

Nothing is absolutely guaranteed to negate the adverse affects of a rogue member, but being resolved to minimize his or her influence will enable the school district to survive the rogue's term of office. What is most important is that every board realizes that it must be self governing. If a rogue member continues to disrupt the school system with his or her behavior, it is the board's fault.

What should the Administration do?

Many boards look to their superintendents for guidance in this area; however, this issue is not within the superintendent's ability to oversee or correct. Therefore, if a board member interferes with an administrator's ability to execute his or her responsibilities, the administration must have the liberty to report the disruptive behavior to the board via its superintendent, with complete confidence that the issue will be addressed promptly and efficiently.

The most important thing for the administration to remember is that a rogue member is a board's problem, not an administrative one. The fact that the rogue causes problems for the administration is the impetus for the board to take action to set its own house in order.

Michael T. Adamson is the Director of Board Services for the Indiana School Boards Association. This article is reprinted with permission from the ISBA's winter 2009 magazine.