

Signs of a Rogue Board Member

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The rogue elephant of Aberdare Forest was a bull African bush elephant which terrorized several villages in British East Africa in the early 20th century. The rogue board member is an equally dangerous species that can emerge and terrorize the best of cooperatives. A rogue board member is a board member who is disruptive in the board room or attempts to impose authority outside of a properly convened board meeting. In many cases they are not focused on what is good for the cooperative as a whole but instead are concentrating on a personal agenda and what they feel is “right” for the organization. Rogue board member behavior can manifest in many ways but often involve conflict with CEO, disrespectful interaction with other board members and uncomfortable interactions with staff.

Signs that you have a rogue board member, or a good board member going rogue include dominating board room discussion, and nitpicking every decision, Rogue board members often do not understand the difference between governance and management and are eager to micro-manage decisions that are clearly under the responsibility of the CEO. They also tend to ignore communication channels and feel it is their prerogative to unilaterally request information from staff. This can leave employees, particularly key employees such as the CFO, feeling abused or bullied.

A well functioning board should have healthy debate on every decision. That involves considering both the arguments for, and the counterarguments against, any particular course of action. There is a role for the devil’s advocate in the board room, as long as he or she is focused on a healthy discussion that examines an issue from all sides. The devil’s advocacy role can transition into rogue behavior when the goal is to define winners and losers on every issue. A rogue board member is a serious problem that can make the entire board dysfunctional.

The post mortem examination of the Aberdare Forest elephant found a musket ball lodged in the nerves beneath its tusk. It was speculated that the pain from the old injury drove the bull to act aggressively. I doubt that tooth pain is the cause of most rogue board member behavior but I have heard them described as a pain in another part of the anatomy!

In my next newsletter I’ll share ideas on how to prevent the rogue board member scenario from occurring.

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