

Should You Invite the Devil into Your Board Room?

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The Devils Advocate (*Advocatus Diaboli* in Latin) is the popular name for a former official position within the Catholic Church, who "argued against the canonization of a candidate in order to uncover any character flaws or misrepresentation of the evidence. Some cooperatives have considered using the devil's advocate structure in the boardroom. The board would designate a devil's advocate on a rotating basis. The devil's advocate would take an opposing view to challenge an idea or project the board is considering. The hope would be that by responding to the questions and challenges, the board is forced into healthy debate considering arguments it might not have considered.

There are clearly advantages and disadvantages in designating a devil's advocate in the boardroom. Healthy debate is always important. While cooperative board members tend to be independent thinkers, there is always the possibility of "group think" in any board. The devil's advocate comments could give other members more confidence in raising issues. There is also real value in any board member conducting research related to a decision. Analyzing the effects of key assumptions in a feasibility study could give the board a much better understanding of the upside and downside of the project.

Social researcher have found no difference in decision making between groups with consensus decision making and those with an appointed devil's advocate. It appears that only genuine dissent, and not dissent manufactured through role-playing, influences a board's critical thinking. A devil's advocate can even generate the very situation it is designed to avoid. The remainder of the board can rely on the devil's advocate to consider opposing points and perceive less need for their own critical analysis.

Perhaps a better solution is to create an environment where every board member considers the benefits and risks of each decision. Ideally, the board should discuss the pros and cons prior to anyone taking a position on the issue. If a board member disagrees with the consensus opinion, they should do so. I would hope that a board member does not need the cloak of a devil's advocate to present a dissenting opinion.

The best boards cultivate critical thinking and then work toward a consensus that they all support. In achieving that, the devil is in the details!

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