The success of a board is determined in part by its collection ambition. It is easier to create a great board if you strive to be great.

But even among enviable boards, mediocrity has a way of slipping in. Here are four problem behaviors that once they appear need to be fixed immediately.

**Poor Attendance at Meetings**

Beyond the usual complications of family, work, and other commitments, the primary reason people fail to show up at meetings is that the meetings are not productive or interesting. The best solution is to create challenging agendas that focus on decision-making. You might also try these easy to implement ideas:

_Hold fewer meetings_

If you gather monthly, try ten meetings per year. Make each one count a little more.

_Distribute the agenda beforehand_

At least one week before the meeting, share the agenda with a reminder about the date, time, and location. Hint: controversial agenda items always boost turnout.

_Feed people_

It is one of the oldest ways to express appreciation. If cost is a concern, rotate this task among the board members and ask them to take turns covering the expense or bringing food.

_Include a “mission moment”_

Include a personal testimonial from a client, or a video excerpt from your recent performance, or a brief slide show about the land your organization just preserved—something tangible to reconnect trustees with the mission and remind them why they serve.

**Poor Follow-through on Commitments**

Perhaps the most common complaint about boards centers around promises not kept. “I’ll take care of it,” says the well-meaning trustee—and then life gets in the way. Here are a few thoughts to keep your board firmly on task:

_Negotiate guidelines for how much time you expect of board members_

This begins with recruitment, but should be revisited at least once a year with the full board.

_Develop and use a board job description_

Make sure you have a written agreement that outlines mutual expectations. When you sit down to talk about time, take a look at this document to ensure that it remains accurate and relevant.

_Build “time off” into the board calendar_

This can be done collectively: “Since we tend to get less work done in August, let’s agree not to make any commitments that month.” As an alternative, free time could be allocated on a rotating basis: “Anna’s daughter is visiting in April, so she’s requested no extra board work that month. Who has a busy stretch ahead and wants to claim May as time off?”
Not-for-Profit Industry
Four Board Behaviors Requiring Mr. Fix-it

**Personal Agendas and Conflicts of Interest**

Every now and then, people join a nonprofit board to re-create the world in their own image. However, the vast majority of trustees assume their responsibilities with good intentions and a degree of humility.

If you begin with the assumption of goodwill and reasonable motives, it will be much easier to reach a consensus about conflicts of interest. Here is how to do it.

*Try to define inappropriate behavior before it begins*

It is unlikely you can tackle this subject in the course of a regular meeting, so put it on the agenda for your next board retreat. Create examples to debate and then use these examples to develop a policy.

For example, if you are a trustee of a school, how far can you go to promote a school policy that would benefit a subset of the students, including your own child? If you are working to conserve open space, how would you prioritize protection of adjacent land that could increase the monetary value of your own property?

*Request conflict of interest policies from sister organizations*

If your group belongs to a peer network or is evaluated by a credentialing agency, ask for a template or a list of criteria that cover conflicts of interest.

*Name it*

If you believe a trustee has crossed the line by promoting his or her self-interest, take responsibility and raise the issue. Talk with the person individually, perhaps accompanied by the board chair. If this strategy fails, you may need to bring your concerns to the attention of the full board.

*Recuse yourself*

If you and your colleagues agree you have a conflict of interest, step aside while others make the relevant decision. If necessary, the board can create a benchmark to trigger this recusal. For example, if two-thirds of the trustees perceive a conflict of interest, the relevant board member(s) would be required to step aside for that vote or other decision-making process.
Inactive Board Members Who Really Need to Leave
Are board members still providing value to your organization? If not, it might be time for a change. The practice of term limits institutionalizes turnover and forces the board to seek out new blood, new energy, and new ideas. If you don’t yet have such a policy, consider the following options:

Develop and institute a board job description
Clarifying your mutual expectations and commitments—making them specific and tangible, rather than relying on assumptions—will help to level the playing field for all leaders.

Use this job description to initiate a self-evaluation process for all board members
Based on the evaluation, ineffective board members will sometimes re-commit to the work and improve their performance. In other cases, individuals who can’t or won’t meet the standards will take the opportunity to bow out. “It’s a new era,” they’ll say, “and you’re looking for things I can’t provide.”

Include specific criteria for meeting attendance
For example, “Three consecutive unexcused absences will be considered resignation from the board.”

Create an “honorary board” for those leaving the governing board
If appropriate, keep the names of departing trustees on the letterhead and maintain their connection to the organization. They can even be assigned specific tasks—for example, organizing a donor recognition event or hosting a house party.

Live with it
You need a critical mass of effective board members—for grassroots groups, typically five or six active and committed people—to be effective. If things are working reasonably well, you may decide to accept reality: not everyone will serve with the same level of passion and skill. Do the best you can with the people you got.

The preceding article is adapted from Andy Robinson’s new book, “What Every Board Member Needs to Know, Do, and Avoid.”