

Three Stages To An Emotionally Connected Board

by Lola Gershfeld, PsyD

Emotion in the boardroom is dismissed by most directors, who prefer to focus on data and strategy. However, it is always an issue just beneath the surface. Board meetings contain matters of power, bullying, isolation and pride as much as any other field of human interaction. However, in the boardroom, we try to ignore them—often to the detriment of good governance. Since board dysfunction is often an issue of relationship dysfunction, why not try opening up?

Years ago, I served on a board where members had the most horrible fights and the most terrible interactions. In spite of all that, I knew that they really cared about the company. That idea intrigued me. I would sit and listen to them during those horrible fights, and as distressing as it was for me, I always knew that the directors really cared about each other.

In the last two decades, the science of adult bonding and secure attachment has developed rapidly, which led me to implement an emotional-focused approach based on the research and theories of Sue Johnson, Carl Rogers, John Bowlby and Salvador Minuchin in my consulting with boards. Boards began to transform right in front of my eyes from being completely disconnected to becoming more engaged and cohesive, allowing them to collaborate and move forward with the items on their agenda.

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Boards are effective groups for creating change and improving performance in companies. People join boards to satisfy a purpose, whether professional or

personal. Each director has a role in how effective the board is. The fact that directors share a common goal engenders a healthy sense of dependency among members. As a result, trust and bonds are instinctually formed.

When board members are able to sustain their bonds on an emotional level, their efforts strengthen safety, trust and loyalty, allowing the dynamics to flourish. When they are unable to create or leverage such experiences, the board's collective ability to function at top capacity becomes subverted, and the chances of becoming dysfunctional dramatically increase.

Dysfunctional boards are bad for business. They tarnish a company's credibility, erode public trust, and lead to toxic cultures. Thus, it becomes increasingly important for board members to understand the interrelated facets of group dynamics and emotions, specifically how each impacts group productivity and performance.

The approach is simple—get to the root of the problem and fix it. As human beings, we are designed to thrive in safe environments which are fueled by emotional connection. Emotion is our sensor of that safety.

When you can sense the cue and recognize the emotion, you are able to send clear messages, creating positive interactions and pulling each other closer. When you miss the cue, you have a higher chance of getting into a negative interaction pattern that is fueled by anxiety, fear, or shame—three emotions that people do not like to talk about. This is why it is so important to understand how emotions can work for and against us. Let me illustrate this point by sharing a consultation I had with a private company board of directors.

The company is in the manufacturing industry

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with approximately of \$100 million in revenue. The board consists of three members who were having difficulties making decisions, communicating with each other, and getting things done during board meetings. They wanted to improve their dynamics, effectiveness and performance.

In my first interview, I learned that they have been having these issues for a few years. They felt discouraged, disheartened, powerless, and embarrassed in front of their owners, management team, employees, and other stakeholders. Even though they would retreat and focus on things that they could control, their negative board interactions harmed company performance, causing a loss of focus and direction. Within the board, their stress and anxiety with each other kept mounting. In short, the board was dysfunctional.

The goal of the consultation was to reconnect board members, create unity and help them be more productive during board meetings. I used the board dynamics process, which uses three stages to realign the directors, set up a safe environment, and give them the tools to maintain positive emotional connections in the boardroom.

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□ *Stage 1: Identifying the board's current interaction cycle.*

As the board members begin sharing their experience, the first thing I do is to create safety so that they can feel comfortable to speak openly with about what is happening for them. This helps gain a sense of the emotional realities that underlie their board interactions.

Then, I start mapping the steps in their interaction by identifying the emotional needs of each member. I make sure not to talk about who starts the negative cycle or who to blame. In this process no one is to blame—board members just get caught in the negative cycle.

As directors share what was happening, I slow down the process to contain the emotion and delineate the steps that led to that emotion. For example, Tom would say something like “You guys are always working against me,” and Steve or Mary automatically responded with a defensive comment like “You never want to listen to us.” This is when I say, “Can we slow down here? I think you are saying something very important. Would that be okay?” They stop and this provides them time to take a breath and slow the cycle down.

I then take the opportunity to reflect what just happened. I say, “Tom, what I am hearing you say is that you’ve been trying so hard to be part of the team that and it seems like Mary and Steve never agree with you. Am I getting it?”

He says, “Yes.”

I then go a bit further, “I hear that it has been difficult for you to feel like you are not part of the team. Am I correct?”

He says, “Yes.”

“Tom, that’s has been pretty difficult for you?”

“Yes. I don’t see them putting that much effort in including me as I do.”

“Yes, you put a lot of effort in making sure that they include you are included because you care so much about the company.”

“Yes. I do.”

In this case, when Tom feels left out, he withdraws and starts to blame and criticizes other board members as a way of reaching out. The problem with this approach is that Steve and Mary feel shut out. The blame and criticism are viewed as danger cues which trigger an alarm in them. So they respond with judgment and criticism back at Tom.

Because everyone continues to throw punches at each other, they become entrenched in a negative cycle without realizing that it takes them over. The vortex gets too strong and the board ends up going nowhere.

At these moments, boards need to take a pause and identify what is going on. What is triggering these emotions? It is not the fault of individual directors—it is the negative cycle that the entire board is caught in. By eliminating the idea of “bad guys”

and redirecting attention to the negative cycle, board members now have a cause to rally around.

Nothing unites a group like a common enemy. In this case, the enemy is the negative cycle. It is impeding the growth of the company, its mission, vision, and takes away from its core values.

Once the negative cycle is identified, it should be named by the board, which will help unite them. In this case, the board named it the “Clash of the Titans.” Coming up with a name may seem silly, but it verifies the realness of the problem. Once the problem was named, we dove into the emotions that were created because of it.

Helping each board member identify exactly what they feel validates their feelings. This validation is essential in creating a safe environment for directors to share their fears and anxiety. It is a way of showing someone that they are being heard.

Research shows that there is a strong correlation between feelings of belonging, emotional satisfaction, and cognitive functioning. Feelings of belonging are fostered when board members experience comfortable interactions and share a sense of genuine interest in each other’s opinions.

As the board explores their interactional pattern and identifies the steps in their negative cycle, they shape their understanding of each other’s emotional needs and triggers. Throughout this process, I encourage them to slow down by tracking the steps, deepening the emotions, validating, and unfolding their emotional processes when it gets more difficult.

By slowing down the process, it becomes much easier to keep board members in the current moment. This is important when trying to eliminate blame which often gets them off track in focusing on the past. Reflecting the steps over and over again, identifying emotions, validating, and creating order helps to refocus the board toward connection.

□ ***Stage 2: Restructuring board interaction and developing cohesion.***

Once the board becomes more aware and understands their negative cycle, they move on to the second stage, which is to create new emotional experience. The board dynamics process helps directors restructure their interaction by creating bonding moments

which pull board members closer to each other.

Bonding moments are created by what we call “enactments.” These enactments are a way of facing your emotions and allowing yourself to share them with your fellow board members. Since this process is experiential, to initiate a change in the cycle, people must be moved emotionally. Thus, the experience of “feeling what the other person feels” creates an emotional experience and leads to connection.

To initiate an enactment, I would say something like, “Can you turn and tell Mary: When I don’t get a response from you, all I hear is I am not good enough and that hurts. I shut down to stop the pain.” Here, we are helping Tom to formulate and develop a clear message of his experience. This also helps redefine his interaction with Mary, and form a new emotional engagement, changing the trajectory of their relationship.

This board struggled with this step because they were so deep in the cycle. Getting Tom to say “When I don’t get a response from you, all I hear is I am not good enough and that hurts” was understandably a huge challenge because it put him in such a vulnerable position. When you build from a place of zero trust, to put yourself out there is extremely difficult and courageous.

Empathy provides directors with an emotional safety and response that helps them pull each other together, so they do not feel like they are struggling alone.

While I guide directors through this process, they have to speak to each other to really break down the walls and begin establishing the important emotional connection. During enactment, the board members start showing each other empathy. Empathy has an extremely positive effect on exploring and creating new experiences. Empathy provides directors with an emotional safety and response that helps them pull each other together, so they do not feel like they are struggling alone.

Now that the board was finally sending clear messages to one another, we began to develop new

steps for a positive interactional cycle among board members. After Tom would share, I would ask Steve and Mary how that made them feel, making sure to validate everyone's emotions.

Research shows that when people feel cared for, it enhances connections, both among group members and to the organization. This connectivity increases board functionality as well as loyalty to the company. It also increases the prestige of serving on the board, which attracts valuable human capital.

Changing the way people interact with each other is tough, and this board was no exception. Still, when I asked Tom how it felt to finally say exactly how he was feeling, he responded, "It feels a hell of a lot better than running and putting up 3,000-foot walls and hiding all the time."

It takes much practice and patience to develop a new positive interactional cycle. However, the result increases board performance, and the fulfillment of board experience.

Expressing gratitude for every board member's efforts is a pivotal tool for increasing board effectiveness. Appreciation and recognition are powerful ways to help directors feel valued and to increase loyalty.

□ *Stage 3: Consolidation and integration.*

Once we create a new pattern, it is important to recognize improvements that the board has made. I asked the board directors to take a step back and view their progress. Looking at the amount of forward movement they made in just a short period of time is invigorating.

It was motivating for board members to see how different they felt after just talking about their emotions for a few hours. They had shifted out of a negative pattern that had been controlling their relationships for years. They took risks and were honest with one another. These directors were brave and faced a difficult challenge together. What they did was impressive, and reflecting on that will help them in the future when times get tough.

Getting in the habit of expressing gratitude for every

board member's efforts is a pivotal tool for increasing board effectiveness. Showing appreciation and recognition is a powerful way to help directors feel valued and to increase loyalty. Board meetings are an especially good place to acknowledge individual and team efforts. Public recognition elevates individual and group status, inspires the board, and motivates people to excel in their performance.

This stage is about reinforcement of their courage and their dedication to positive interaction. Maintaining an emotionally safe, trusting boardroom environment is a huge challenge. By creating and reinforcing secure attachment, board members can make sure that they do not fall back into the negative cycle.

To consolidate and integrate their efforts, I would say something like, "Look at what you did here today. You just shifted out of this negative pattern that has controlled your relationship for years. You were so brave. You went into difficult emotions, and were honest. It's incredible that you can do that." This validates and supports the board as they take new risks and integrate the progress that they have made.

The board went from ten miles apart to standing together with each other. Generally, board members know the business, are experts on the industry, and are intelligent business people who know how to resolve issues. The problem is not that they do not know what to do, but that they get caught in a dreadful cycle that gets them disconnected from each other. Using an emotional-focused approach to boardroom consulting is about removing the emotional blockage so board members are connected and solve challenges together.

By starting with identification of the negative cycle, board members are able to see the problem as it is happening. Coming together to name the problem permits them to start speaking the same language and stay on the same page. Recognition of the cycle gives board members the chance to open up and have their feelings of fear, anxiety, or stress validated.

Once the negative cycle is identified and understood, it is imperative to begin altering the way boards interact. Establishing better connections and getting board members to be empathetic towards one

another is the only way to break down the “Clash of the Titans.”

In the final stage we consolidate our progress and integrate the previous steps into the board’s operation. Board members must be vigilant in maintaining connection because it leads to safety and trust.

These three stages can take weeks or months depending on how often you meet and how motivated the board is to make a lasting change. The third stage never really ends. Effective board members are constantly aware of the emotional impact of their actions and work together to improve board dynamics.

These three directors have a long way to go, but with a new interactional cycle and a safe environment, they are on their way to a more fulfilling role

and higher performance.

Ultimately, a board is simply a group of people who must work together. While we can (and should) spend time focusing on governance, keeping up with industry trends, and assessing strategy, we must not ignore the human condition in the boardroom. Board members need to feel safe and connected. This is a need that is wired into our brains.

When directors are connected, they work better together, feel energized, and have a better sense of accomplishment. These three stages provide an emotional-focused approach that gives board members the power to be stronger and address any challenge together. ■

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4440 Hagadorn Road
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