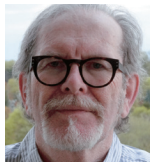




# My Experience as a Condo Board President

By Tom Howard

I moved into my first and only condominium approximately five years ago. It is an eleven-storey building located on the edge of the core downtown area. My wife and I were part of the first wave of residents moving into the 114 units. For many, this was their first time owning a condominium. It seemed a good number had owned and lived in condominiums previously.



I attended an impromptu meeting organized by the original board of directors. There were about a dozen, or less than 10 per cent of owners, in attendance. I recall the meeting was to highlight issues being experienced by owners in the early stages. There seemed to be complaint on top of complaint. Owners presented issues that were occurring, as well as issues that may occur, if we don't rush to prevent them. The board at the time seemed to respond to the complaints with the clear sugges-

tion that further rules would be the answer to the various issues. There didn't seem to be an attempt to discuss the validity of the several so-called issues that were presented. My initial experience was surprise and confusion as both my wife and I, and our immediate neighbours, were enjoying our condo experiences. As I sat quietly trying to see if in fact problems presented were necessarily problematic at all, as well as pondering pre-emptive actions that were suggested, I began to recall comments from friends who warned me of the hazards of condominium life, focusing on the powers held by a condominium board. So the light switched on.

## Jump Feet First

Knowing that all the board positions would be open after the first year of a new condo, I actively considered running for a board position. I asked the board member chairing what he'd recommend to research regarding a job

description for a board member. He simply pointed to the building's Declaration. This proved a good starting place.

I reviewed the Declaration, acquired a hard copy of the *Condominium Act*, which I read over a few days, (armed with a highlighter), closely examined the existing rules document for our condo, and decided to run for one of the three board positions. I received the most votes in the election of a completely new board, and I stepped into the three-year term. (The next vote-getter serving the two-year term, and so on). After almost three years as a board president, here are my thoughts regarding qualities, skills and knowledge required to attain positive leadership from a board of directors of a condominium:

## Essential Qualities for a Director

**Patience.** The more common areas there are as part of your condominium, the more this trait will serve you.

Common areas we have include games room, party room, a small gym, a media room, lobby and foyer, all the various hallways, as well as the garden and other outdoor shared areas. Not everyone can have everything they want in regard to the common spaces; nonetheless, some

considering significant changes, such as a review of condominium rules or building improvements, it should be open to sharing this with owners in advance of presenting the changes in an official manner. Rationale for any proposed change should be given clearly. This

Most urban communities are culturally and ethnically diverse. Among condominium neighbours there is much diversity. Board members should seek to avoid their own cultural biases in making decisions that impact daily lives of residents.

**Knowledge.** A knowledge of documents essential to the operation of the condominium is essential. These include the *Condominium Act*, your condominium Declaration, your condominium rules, as well as Tarion or its eventual replacement. At various times, being aware of municipal regulations will be of great value, e.g., barbecues, regulations for storage, etc. I'm not suggesting expertise as a precondition to getting the job, but surely a commitment to gain sufficient knowledge should be expected of a board candidate. The value of this is immense. Being aware of what due process looks like, what possibilities and what limits exist in regulatory documents simply saves spinning your wheels and tail chasing. Being able to develop this knowledge just to the point where you know where to look, will bolster a board member's competence and self-confidence. It also should ensure that a board

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will try persistently. (I used to think that a saying like "some people just love to complain" was misguided, somewhat dismissive, or over-used. I do see some truth to this statement now.)

**Openness.** This implies an understanding that teamwork can accomplish more effective leadership and management. Relevant input into decisions from all board members should become a trait of the board. As well, when boards are

provides for feedback where concerns can be addressed or further clarity provided. It's also a safeguard against a micro-management style. Teamwork can include other important players at various times. Having a trusting, open relationship with your condo management company is of utmost importance. Our Registered Condominium Manager (RCM) is well-versed in her role, and is approachable and communicative.



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t. 416 354 1926 f. 416 510 8880

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Be aware of service delivery to the condominium, whether it's who takes your garbage and recycling, to those who manage elevators, electrical systems and other building maintenance functions. Be aware of the terms of the contract you have with suppliers and contractors. There is comfort in knowing where options lie should the service not be meeting your needs. (A condominium property manager can be a large asset in obtaining the best services.)

### Important Skills for a Director

**Decision-making.** The ability to use a consistent process in decision-making is essential. An effective board must have the ability to create discussion and evaluate information to separate perception from reality before deciding a course of action. (It was my concern that this was not in place; that motivated me to seek board membership.) A process ensures elimination of decisions based on scenarios such as "he said/she said" or, my personal favourite, "in the other condo they did this and everything was perfect." In the time I've been on the board we've had anecdotal information presented with a demand for action. Clear thinking board members must properly evaluate information and take steps to determine facts and potential impact before deciding a course of action, or even if any action is required. This implies time to research information to gather a full picture. My experience is that this has been time well spent.

**Ability to work as a team.** Essential to this is an ability to work through a process of information collecting and collaboration prior to arriving at a decision that affects the lives of the condo community.

**Communication Skills.** Creating a free flow of information, especially in meetings, is valuable. Board members should be conscious of always listening in a way that people will talk, as well as talking in a way people will listen. (Patience obviously can enhance this skill.) Boards should provide ongoing progress on projects via printed board updates or newsletters. If you hold information meetings, be ready with information you've gathered from contractors, legal personnel, and from other areas where the board has sought reliable information. Be open about costs involved, and relate the costs to the condominium's financial status.

The more openness presented in a well thought-out manner, the more confidence owners will have in their board.

**A note for new condos: New communities may wish to put more stock in new ideas not old ones.**

**Basic math.** Well here is where you finally use some of the math you may or may not have retained from school. It helps to understand basic accounting principles, financial management, aspects of accrual accounting, how fees are established proportionally, how condominium

budgets operate. While it is helpful to have a board member who has accounting expertise, this may not often be the case. A good RCM should consistently display good financial accounting skills.

Remember we learn on a curve, and we use the skills of others in tandem with our own. ■

**Tom Howard** is a first-time condo resident who has served as president on a Kitchener condominium board for the past three years.

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