



RURAL HOSPITAL LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE



Washington State
Hospital Association



ASSOCIATION of
WASHINGTON
PUBLIC HOSPITAL DISTRICTS

Navigating Tension in the Boardroom

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Today's Session: desired outcomes

In one hour, you'll:

Understand value of productive tension & how it strengthens board decision-making.

Understand costs of unhealthy tension.

Learn ways to manage tension without derailing discussions or damaging relationships.

Build confidence in navigating diverse viewpoints & challenging conversations.

Headwinds from every direction





Boards need members with skill to navigate ambiguity & tension, credibility to engage constructively with management & perspective to balance competing priorities under pressure.

Defining the Board's Role



Oversight & accountability



Strategy approval & monitoring



CEO selection, support, succession



Governance & culture

Role Clarity

High-performing boards stay focused on oversight, strategy, long-term value & leadership continuity instead of drifting into management's lane.

“NIFO” – asking smart questions & bringing outside perspective

How to stay strategic

- Clarify roles & expectations up front
- Set explicit agreements with CEO about where board adds value/does not
- Focus meetings on big questions
- Ask, don't tell
- Provide expertise, not orders
- Hold management accountable for results, not process



How Board Culture Shapes Your Organization

- Influences entire organization
- Establishes unspoken norms for behavior, transparency, accountability
- Impact of your words

Trust, respect, role clarity & open communication are key ingredients.

Board culture – driving excellence



Board acting as a team is more important than ever



Well intended, respectful interactions with management team



Maximizing board value is essential



Avoid being a “gotcha” board – not productive - disrespectful

What's the difference?

What's the difference between healthy tension & unhealthy tension?

What is the value of productive tension & healthy conflict?

High-performing boards recognize difference between constructive healthy tension & unhealthy destructive conflict.

Productive tension

Productive tension -- such as disagreement & challenging assumptions – is necessary for effective collaboration & decision-making.

Goal isn't conflict for its own sake, it's agitation that reveals what's stuck.

It's about learning how to shift behavioral norms so that your board challenges ideas without diminishing the person.

Reframe tension as a governance asset.

Listening is critical component

**Most conflict doesn't escalate because people disagree.
It escalates because someone feels unheard.**



Disagreement isn't a roadblock — it's a route to better thinking

Innovation thrives on diverse perspectives...how we disagree can make or break collaboration.

- Lead with curiosity & intellectual humility, not certainty.
- Acknowledge others' views before asserting your own.
- Build trust & connection.
- Embrace disagreement as tool for clarity & creativity.

Aim for dialogue that drives progress, rather than polarization.

Understanding Sources of Boardroom Tension



- Role confusion between governance & management
- Personality clashes among board members
- Physical/cognitive decline limiting participation
- Differing views on strategy & risk
- Competing stakeholder interests
- Financial pressures or organizational change
- Succession planning & leadership transitions
- Mergers, acquisitions, or major investments

Signs of Healthy Tension



- Respectful challenge & inquiry
- Diverse perspectives being heard
- Board members asking difficult questions
- Focus on issues rather than individuals
- Willingness to reconsider positions
- Strong debate followed by unified decisions

**Goal is not consensus at all costs,
but informed
decision-making.**

Signs of Unhealthy Tension



- Personal attacks or defensiveness
- Side conversations & coalition building
- Repeated revisiting of settled decisions
- Dominance by 1-2 voices
- Passive-aggressive behavior
- Withholding information
- Loss of trust between board members & management

When these patterns emerge, board effectiveness & organizational performance will suffer.

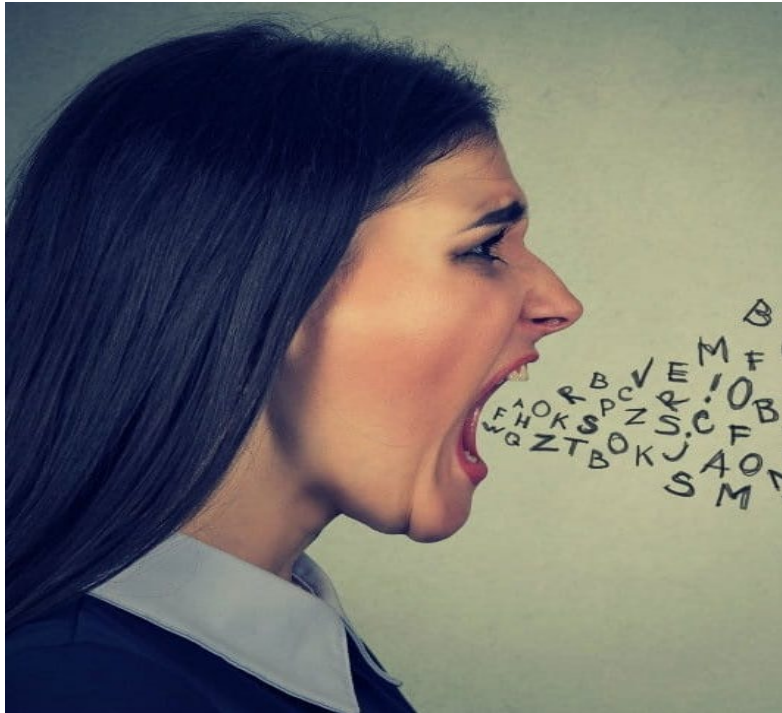
Costs of Unhealthy Tension - \$

- ✓ Weakened oversight
- ✍ Impaired decision-making
- Delayed progress
- 📈 Increased exposure
- 💰 Value/reputation erosion
- CEO/leadership team turnover

What else?

8 Boardroom Behaviors that Lead to Disruption

Dominator – too much airtime



Perpetual Naysayer – blocks progress, disruptive, disrespectful



8 Boardroom Behaviors that Lead to Disruption

Head in Sand – attends but contributes little, withdraws, passive



Alarmist – overreacts, catastrophizes



8 Boardroom Behaviors that Lead to Disruption

CEO's cheerleader – inappropriately defends management



Historian – constantly references “how we used to do it”, anchored to past



8 Boardroom Behaviors that Lead to Disruption

Technician – obsessed with detail, veers into management's lane



Know-it-All – arrogant, prioritizes self over all others



High-performing boards are built not on
uniformity of thought, but on mutual respect

Challenge ideas vigorously; treat people respectfully.

Slippery slope



HEALTHY

Discussion

Dissent

Disagreement

Debate



Derail

Disruptive

Disrespect

Damage

Disintegrate

UNHEALTHY

Distinguish Healthy Tension from Unhealthy Tension/Disrespect

Healthy tension:	Unhealthy tension/disrespect:
Challenge ideas Clarify perspectives Seek better decisions Remain professional	Attack people Dismiss perspectives Create fear or silence Damage trust

**Boards need vigorous & respectful debate.
Objective is not harmony; it is productive governance.**

What does disrespectful behavior look like?

Disrespectful behavior is any action, communication, or attitude that diminishes another person's dignity, value, role, or contribution. It can be obvious & overt, or subtle & difficult to identify.



Disrespectful behavior negates everything that comes after...

A behavior may be disrespectful if it...

Demeans a person's dignity.

Dismisses their legitimate contribution or perspective.

Creates fear, embarrassment, or exclusion.

Signals that their time, expertise, or role is not valued.



Verbal signs of disrespect

- Interrupting or talking over others
- Dismissing ideas without consideration
- Using sarcasm, ridicule, or mockery
- Speaking in a condescending or patronizing tone
- Publicly criticizing or embarrassing someone
- Shouting, swearing, or using insulting language
- Making personal attacks instead of addressing issues
- Ignoring questions or refusing to engage respectfully



Nonverbal signs of disrespect

Eye-rolling, smirking, or scoffing

Turning away while someone is speaking

Checking phones or multitasking during conversations

Exaggerated sighs or expressions of annoyance

Excluding someone from discussions or meetings

Invading personal space in an intimidating manner



Boardroom settings

Dominating discussions & not allowing others to contribute

Dismissing minority viewpoints without exploration

Using positional power to silence debate

Side conversations during presentations

Publicly challenging competence rather than questioning ideas

Failing to prepare for meetings, signaling that others' time is not valued

Repeatedly ignoring established governance processes

Something to ponder...

What important information might never reach your board if a board member or executive does not feel safe speaking candidly?

What are the strategic & cost impacts?

**Unhealthy tension is not primarily a behavioral problem;
it is a governance risk.**

Addressing disrespectful behavior

Goal is not simply to stop the behavior...

it is to protect board's ability to **govern effectively** while maintaining constructive relationships.



What Respectful Behavior Looks Like Instead

- Active listening
- Curiosity before judgment
- Constructive disagreement
- Acknowledging contributions
- Following through on commitments
- Treating everyone with professionalism regardless of position
- Providing feedback privately & respectfully when possible

Focus on strategic issues, decisions, & outcomes

How to deal with disrespectful behavior



Be quiet, pause, moment of silence...don't react



Person often looking for way to justify their anger



Disrespectful behavior rarely improves when ignored...address early!



Chair must intervene

The way someone treats you is reflection of their capacity, life experiences & internal state at any given moment.

It is rarely about you...more you understand that people can only show up from where they are emotionally & mentally, the less personally you will take it.

Individual responsibility

01

Know your
triggers -
manage your
own emotions

02

Foster
respectful
debate

03

Recognize your
conflict skill
gaps

04

Address
unproductive
behavior if it
escalates

Tension Tolerance



- Your capacity to endure stress & pressure—your "tension tolerance"
- Your nervous system's capacity to handle pressure, ambiguity, or conflict without shutting down or acting impulsively. It dictates how quickly you bounce back from daily stressors before slipping into "fight-or-flight" survival mode.

More material the issue, the more tension tolerance is needed

Habits

HABIT #1 – ask yourself	HABIT #2 – ask other person	HABIT #3
Why am I feeling defensive, what might I be missing?	Help me understand the real concern here?	Pause before responding – don't interrupt!
What story am I telling myself that might not be true?	I might be wrong, what am I missing?	
What if I'm wrong – what information would change my mind?	Help me get this right – is the real issue X or Y?	
	I agree this is worth talking about...	

Tension Tolerance

- Capability to engage in constructive disagreement
- Willingness to sit with discomfort in debate
- Ability to hear & test opposing viewpoints
- Maintain respect while challenging assumptions
- Balance openness with decision urgency
- Sustain focus on outcomes, not personalities

**High-performing boards don't avoid tension —
they use it to make better decisions.**

What does tension tolerance look like at the board table?

 Board members asking probing questions

 Differing views are voiced without hesitation

 Silence is not agreement

 Composed, calm under pressure

 Decisions follow robust decisions

 Ask for feedback

 **Is this the board room you sit in?**

9 Leadership Practices for Navigating Tension

1. Establish	2. Establish	3. Surface	4. Separate	5. Practice
Establish psychological safety	Establish productive behavior & conflict norms	Surface issues early	Separate issues from individuals	Practice inquiry over advocacy

9 Leadership Practices for Navigating Tension

6. Manage	7. Strengthen	8. Reframe	9. Train
Manage emotional dynamics	Strengthen relationships outside the boardroom	Reframe tension as a governance asset	Train board members in constructive challenge

Role of Board Chair

Chair plays critical role as facilitator of productive dialogue. Responsibilities include:

Ensuring all voices are heard... building trust & psychological safety

Managing unproductive behaviors in the boardroom

Maintaining focus on governance issues

Summarizing areas of agreement & disagreement

**Effective chair does not eliminate tension;
they channel it toward better decisions.**

Board Chair Competency



When a board selects its chairperson, while there are many characteristics that are important to consider, questions often overlooked are:



Does the chair have courage & ability to address conflict?



Does the chair have ability to provide feedback to board members in a timely, honest & calm manner?

CEO's role when there is tension in the boardroom



Chair–CEO coordination is decisive



CEO STABILIZES CONTENT



CHAIR RESTORES
PROCEDURAL CONTROL

Structural Changes

Recruit for governance temperament & “boardroom skills”

Recruit for diversity of thought

Strong independent leadership

Ensure Board Chair competency

Structural Changes

Onboarding

Invest in effective board/management partnership

Robust evaluations

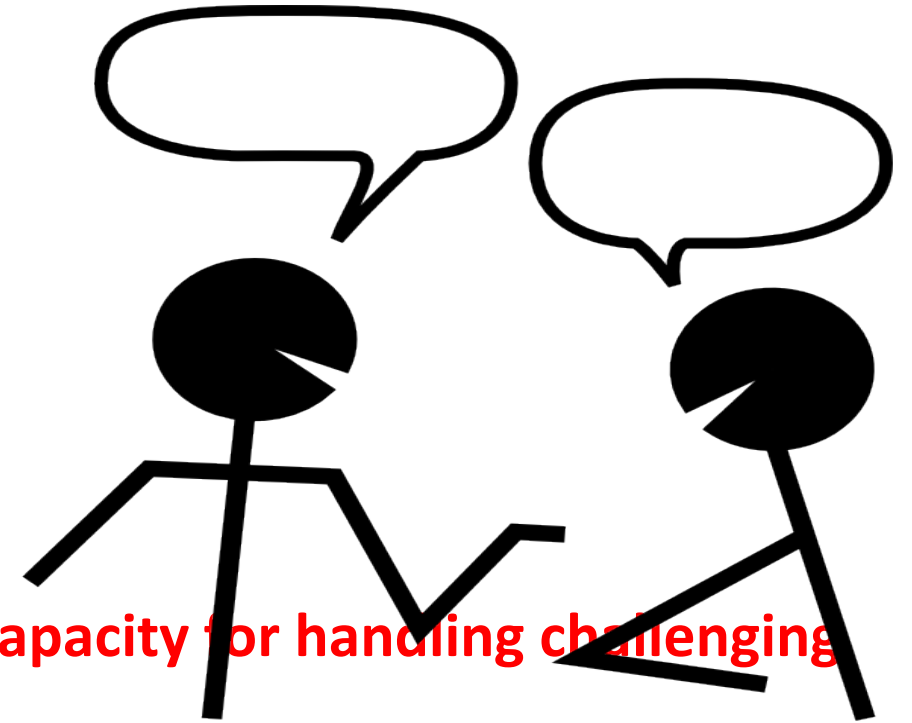
Board code of conduct/civility statement

Conduct Boardroom After-Action Reviews

After challenging discussions, ask:

- What helped us navigate tension effectively?
- Where did we become defensive?
- Were all perspectives heard?
- What would improve our next discussion?

Reflection gradually increases the board's collective capacity for handling challenging conversations.



Key Takeaways

High-performing boards are not those without tension; they are those that can engage in candid, respectful debate while maintaining trust, respect, alignment & commitment to organization's mission.

Healthy tension creates better governance, stronger decisions, greater organizational impact.

Unhealthy tension is a governance risk...creates negative strategic & cost impacts... must be managed!

Thank you!

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