

Appendix 8-A

Passionate Board Member Running Wild

A Real-Life Story with an Enabling Response¹

A colleague contacted me with the following story. She was frustrated and worried about a particular volunteer. She had read my book chapter about enabling volunteers. We talked about the enabling functions and how they might be a strategy to help in her situation. Some weeks later, she provided me with the update that follows the first part of her story. I call this “before” and “after.” These are her words.

Before enabling

Mary is a devoted board member and volunteer at my agency in California. She is a founding board member of the agency and is still on the board despite term limits listed in the bylaws. The board overlooks term limits in Mary’s case because the board thinks Mary is so valuable to the agency’s progress. Mary is willing to continue to serve, and just completed a two-year term as president.

Mary is a computer expert and vice president in a major technology company. She is wildly passionate about nonprofits using technology to achieve their missions, and she has a strong interest in human service agencies like ours. Mary is a natural to chair our technology committee. She gets support from her company when asked to do so, or when she thinks it is necessary. Mary takes the initiative to whatever *she thinks* is great for the agency.

¹Anonymous.

Mary has leveraged a great deal of in-kind support from her company, amounting to \$10,000 or more per year. Our agency boasts the finest and latest in computer equipment, printers, software, and most recently a network to serve up to eight workstations in our office. (However, we don't have a fax machine in our office. As board president, Mary deemed a fax unnecessary because "we should be encouraging the use of e-mail, not faxes"—even though many small nonprofits still cannot afford computers or Internet access, but are able to receive a fax. So our agency shares a fax with multiple other agencies in our building. As the new executive director, I plan to buy a fax. Management is my responsibility, not Mary's or any other board member's.)

As chair of the technology committee, Mary often directs our agency's technology staff. She directs staff to focus on *her* pet projects rather than agency priorities, spending money we do not have. Now the agency risks going over budget.

No one on the board knew what Mary was doing when she was president. No one questioned Mary because she knows "everything" about technology and the board "trusts" her. But the technology stuff is only the tip of the iceberg. As the new executive director, I'm just finding out what has been going on and sharing this information with our new board president.

For example: Mary has been making promises to other agencies, including our funders. There's one funder who is angry at our agency because of promises made that the agency cannot deliver on. Mary even submitted proposals that the board had not approved. In a recent conversation with a funder, the director said to me: "Apparently I shouldn't accept Mary's word as being good for speaking on behalf of the board. Doesn't she know her role?"

Furthermore, Mary goes around me as executive director and asks staff members to do things that are not in the scope of their work. She makes deals with agencies and businesses. The Lone Ranger rides again and no one knows what she is doing. Board and staff are increasingly frustrated with Mary but afraid to do much about her because she works hard and gets us so much in-kind support from her company.

Despite the problems that Mary causes, she is very committed to the agency. She does help us get resources from her company. She contributes more time to the agency than other board members. She rarely says "no" when asked to do something. Bottom line: She provides energy that, if properly channeled, could be very helpful to the agency.

What do we do to rein in Mary? How can we channel her energy and passion? How can we enforce term limits without alienating her? And if Mary has to leave, how do we make sure that we do not lose the support from her company?

As the new executive director—bequeathed this mess—my first reaction was to remove Mary from the board. But despite term limits, the board and nominating committee have chosen to ignore this situation and continue to reelect Mary because of her connections and commitment. If I encouraged the release of Mary, it would be radical and could cause further problems.

So what's my solution? How can I use the enabling functions to fix this mess?

And after ... using the enabling functions

I have to be proactive with board committees, including the nominating committee. I cannot wait to convene a meeting when the committee chair suggests one. Also, I have to prepare better for committee meetings.

With the nominating committee, I will familiarize myself with the bylaws so I can anticipate questions and problems. I will prepare an overview of the trustee participation, committee assignments, attendance record, and their contributions to the agency in terms of time, talents, and financial resources. I will note term limits on this overview.

Already, I'm enlisting the understanding and support of the board chair and some of the experienced trustees who understand the damage that Mary causes. I'm not bad-mouthing Mary but I am keeping leadership informed of the problems. Volunteers need to help me manage Mary. I'm trying to gently fence Mary in—another one of the enabling functions—without making her feel bad.

I'm using the managing and coaching enabling functions with Mary. For example: A few years ago I became “franklinized” and now I use the Franklin Planner to manage my time and hold people accountable. When I speak to people and they agree to do something, I write it down in my Franklin Planner, right in front of them. Then they know that I have a record of what we agreed to and that I will hold them accountable. This may be helpful in keeping Mary on task, doing the things she promises and does well. I hope this will help keep her focused rather than involved in inappropriate areas.

Mary is a big advocate of e-mail. When I communicate with her, I also send a copy to the board president and to the relevant committee chair. The board chair (and two other committee chairs) have agreed to send confirming notes back to Mary. These volunteer leaders will also follow up with Mary by telephone or in person whenever she crosses over into their areas of responsibility. The board president will talk with Mary when she operates outside the collective board decision. I'm enabling other volunteers to help me enable Mary.

The board president and I are very concerned that Mary thinks she has the power to go off on her own, making promises and representing the agency without the direction of the board. Also, she encroaches on the work and authority of the executive director. Certainly Mary covets information, which in my estimation is often an immense abuse of power.

But on second thought, I wonder if it isn't so much an issue of power but rather an issue of insecurity. Perhaps Mary lacks the fortitude or courage to speak clearly the decisions made by the board, particularly when they may not be popular. Mary seems to find it difficult to say “no” to others and likes to be seen as “Ms. Nice Gal.” Perhaps this insight will help me enable Mary in different ways.

Regrettably, Mary's actions demonstrate that she is not committed to the larger community. She may not even realize this. And unfortunately, there has been no process

whereby the agency articulated its shared mission, defined its purpose, and collectively decided what we mean to the community and how we will function. So Mary just invents and communicates her own views.

The new board president recognizes that the agency must create a shared view of mission, purpose, and way to work. He understands the concept of the board as a collective. If he and I together begin to reinforce the group rather than single individuals, we can help change the dynamic of the agency. This is bigger than Mary but also about Mary. This planning process will help me particularly with the enabling function of transmitting organizational values—because the collective board will have worked on this together.

I will have to build a relationship with Mary's company to ensure that the company is committed to our agency and mission, not just committed to Mary. The company's support in terms of in-kind gifts and technological expertise has been critical to building our agency's technological infrastructure. Without it, we would certainly suffer. However, Mary is not the only active volunteer who works for this company. I must strengthen the other relationships. We cannot rely overly on one individual in any situation within the agency.

Second, my board and I will have to mend the community relationships that have been damaged by Mary's actions. I am meeting with funders and rebuilding our credibility without insulting Mary. This will take a long time, and I will involve other board members as appropriate.

I am learning to use my newness as the executive director (a briefly open window!) to ask the right questions of the right people at the right time so that Mary's antics can be exposed innocently enough. This is certainly part of the communications function of enabling.

With Mary, I'm using the enabling functions as an intervention to solve existing problems. But I'm also using the enabling functions to prevent a recurrence with Mary—and to bring us all together as a stronger agency.

I particularly value the enabling function that talks about identifying barriers. It's my job to identify the barriers that exist, thereby understanding the context of the problem. Then I develop short-term and long-term strategies to overcome the problem. I have learned that I must identify and understand the barriers—because the practice of enabling cannot occur and make a positive difference unless I do.

Within the context of limited time resources, this all seems a daunting prospect. I have some impatience to deal with, and I will struggle with this.

But I recognize that the enabling functions have already been very useful to me. I consider each enabling function as I examine the challenges with Mary. And while enabling Mary may not be the entire solution to the agency's problem with her, it can be the solution to the greater problems she and others have created if I work to effectively enable the entire board.