



# Leadership Insight

Striving for effective leadership on boards and committees.

by *Kindra Gordon*, field editor

**W**e think of leadership as a position, but I disagree. To me, leadership is a behavior. Everyone can be a leader regardless of position or title.” Those were the words of Leon Atwell, who spoke this winter at the 6th National Conference on Grazing Lands on the topic of leadership.

The workshop was designed to help

members who serve on committees and boards learn ways to be more effective — whether serving on a state board, a national board or even a local conservation district, school board or county fair board.

The top piece of advice issued: Identify what is expected of the board and its members, and review that guiding principle every year.

It seems like a simple piece of advice, but Atwell points out that it’s not uncommon for an organization’s board of directors to get off on a tangent — often driven by a personal agenda — and fail to get back to providing the leadership necessary to pursue the goals in the best interest of the organization.

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## When conflict arises

Leadership is often considered to be about foresight, future planning and being visionary. However, it also involves handling conflict. South Dakota State University Extension community development specialist Kari O’Neill shares that when she is asked to speak to groups, one of the first topic areas selected is “managing conflict.”

O’Neill has come to realize this is due to one of two things: Either the group wants to be prepared to handle conflict when it arises, or they have a large amount of conflict that has already arisen.

To this she says, “We all live with people around us who view life from different perspectives and have grown up with different life experiences. In a nutshell, that’s what causes conflict.”

O’Neill adds, “In order to deal with conflict, we first need to acknowledge that it’s a natural part of being human, and that many positive ideas and resolutions come from working through it.” She notes that conflict usually comes from four root causes:

- ▶ differences between individuals;
- ▶ differences over goals;
- ▶ differences over strategies for reaching goals; and
- ▶ differences over competition for resources.

As an example, O’Neill offers this scenario: A common ranch conflict might occur between the employer and an employee (who may be family) over the correct way to accomplish a task. For example, you might have your own way to stack bales. In your mind, you’ve probably considered variables such as spoilage prevention and protection from wind. You’ve had experience figuring out the best way to stack. Along comes an employee with a different idea of his or her way to stack bales. You probably both have the same goal of building the best, most sturdy stack pile, but you may disagree about the strategies used to get to that goal. That may seem like a minor conflict, but let’s look at some ways to manage those smaller disagreements before they escalate.

She suggests one way to resolve conflict is avoidance — ignore it and it will go away. If you can live with bale piles that are not stacked your way, there is no conflict.

“Avoidance is definitely used as a strategy, and sometimes it is actually recommended,” O’Neill says. “If the situation will work

itself out quickly without action or if both parties can let it go and move on, avoidance can work.”

However, if there is regret or a buildup of frustration when a conflict is merely avoided, that frustration can come up later as another conflict situation arises, she cautions.

The second strategy for resolving conflict is diffusion. This means addressing the symptoms of the conflict, but not the root. O’Neill gives the example of conflicts that occur in families when working cattle.

“Most of the time, it comes down to miscommunication or lack of communication,” she says. “The conflict is diffused by yelling orders at the time, but then it happens again and again because no one ever discusses a root cause, which may be lack of communicating a clear plan before the roundup begins.”

Another way to resolve conflict is by exerting power, O’Neill says. “While this strategy is also useful in certain situations, it can be detrimental to relationships if there is little or no discussion before the decision is made.”

Lastly, she suggests the preferred strategy of resolving conflict is negotiation. The closer you can get to group consensus on how to handle a conflict, the better the results and implementation of the plan will be down the road.

“Conflict can be very positive if those involved are not already locked into a mind-set,” she explains. “Addressing the issues soon after they arise can prevent this. That employee who stacks bales differently than you do might need to hear what your reasons are for doing it your way. At the same time, it might not hurt for you to hear why the employee does it another way.”

O’Neill concludes, “The thing that makes conflict positive is that it introduces new ideas and perspectives. In a way, it forces you to bring up issues that might remain dormant if someone wasn’t starting to get upset. The key is to address the issue as soon as you can, and be as open-minded as possible, allowing options to be discussed.”

She emphasizes, “Very seldom is there really only one way or one single answer to resolving a conflict. A group that experiences conflict is probably very creative, active and strong. It’s the management of the conflict that can make or break the bonds between the people involved.”

Another comment emphasized during the session: Do what's best for the community or organization. Along with that, realize change is going to happen, and organizations must be prepared for those changes. Atwell noted that boards can do that by "being forward-thinking and planning accordingly."

He added, "Maintaining [the] status quo is not an option — it means your organization is dying. The reasons for change are to make us better than we are today."

Quincy Ellis, a community development specialist, assisted Atwell with the presentation and emphasized the key ingredients for developing a strong, functional board of directors. Ellis noted that having, and adhering to, policy and procedures in the form of established bylaws are essential.

Additionally, Ellis advocates for organizations to have a strategic plan with

goals prioritized. "That is your roadmap to success," he says, but he notes that many organizations do not have a written plan.

He likes to ask this question of board members: Tell me what goal number three is on your plan? He says, "Most don't know because they don't have a plan."

His advice is to plan and set small incremental goals.

"Accomplish a few things as opposed to starting on a bunch that are never completed," he says.

Additionally, Ellis notes that members of the board must understand their roles. This means newly elected board members may need some leadership training.

Plus, in recruiting members to a board, Ellis emphasizes that they should be informed of the skills necessary and the expectations of board members. If they don't feel they "fit the bill," they could then bow out prior to being appointed or elected.

"To have a strong board, you need the right person, and they need to know their role — not just be a warm body filling a chair," he says.

Ellis also has strong words for individuals who have served for 20-plus years on a board.

**"Accomplish a few things as opposed to starting on a bunch that are never completed."  
— Quincy Ellis**

"You may be denying opportunities for others to grow and contribute to the organization," he warns.

Ellis emphasizes that leadership is about growing others. He notes that often "control freaks" may have trouble delegating to others, but notes, "You don't allow others to grow if you don't." He also says, "As you help others grow, it is impossible for you not to grow with them. . . . Leadership is the process of taking people to places they otherwise wouldn't go by themselves."

Lastly, Ellis stresses that no one "owns" a board. Members belong to a board and have the obligation to help the organization grow.



**Editor's note:** Atwell and Ellis work with several rural communities to promote "community excellence." Learn more at <http://communityexcellence.co/>. Their comments are also featured in a free webinar series available to help provide strategies to strengthen setting a mission and vision and implementing a successful plan. While the webinars were created for state grassland coalitions, many of the tips are applicable to all organizations. View them by visiting [www.grazinglands.org](http://www.grazinglands.org) and clicking on "Webinar Series."