

# Mastering Management Maximizing Cooperation and Partnership

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Individual commitment to a group effort; that's what makes a team work, a company work, a society work, a civilization work.

Legendary Green Bay Packers football coach Vince Lombardi left cooperative and condo boards and managers off his short list, but his wisdom about commitment and teamwork could certainly apply to boards and management companies.

According to experts, the most successful board/manager relationships cultivate when both parties have mutual trust and respect, with courteous communication among all individuals involved.

"The best relationships are the ones that have a mutual trust and respect for one another, with courteous communication among all parties (especially if there is a difference of opinion)," says Cynthia Graffeo, senior property manager and director of client relations at Argo Real Estate in New York City. "A partnership that has these characteristics allows a board and management to work as a team to effectively run the building in a professional and business-oriented manner."

## Who's Responsible?

This starts with knowing who is responsible for what, which is typically spelled out in a contract. The responsibility of the property manager is to provide the board with the information they need to make their decisions. The board's job is to take this information and use it to make those decisions and carry out whatever goals the board set for the association regarding the building, the staff, and financial issues and so on.

In any good relationship the ingredients for success include meeting expectations, having good communication, and being open and honest. "Honesty is most important on both sides," says Josh Koppel, CPM, president of HSC Management Corp., in Yonkers. "If a manager is not being honest and giving the full picture, how can the board make an intelligent decision? If the board is only giving the manager half a story, or the story doesn't really exist, how do you address the situation?"

For example, Koppel says that a board may want to start a court action on a resident who is a hoarder, telling the property manager that the apartment is uninhabitable. "We decide to do an inspection first and the apartment is spotless, so what's going on here?" he asks. "Obviously someone has an ax to grind with that resident and didn't tell the other board members the truth."

## Meeting Expectations

As a manager, your responsibility is to work with the board as a team. This means they expect you to be accessible to the board members, talk to them about building concerns and handle any and all concerns or emergencies they have told you about.

“Boards should never hesitate to contact their property manager with any questions or concerns,” says Graffeo. “Property managers are problem solvers who have a wide array of knowledge in building operations. This can range from oversight of capital improvement projects and apartment alterations, to violation prevention and removal, to preventative maintenance and safety, to repairs and handling of emergency situations. Let us know how we’re doing and if there is anything we can do better. We’re here to serve the board and the residents that live in the buildings we manage.”

Remember, however, that there is no ‘I’ in team. You are not working alone. In every building, you are working with board members of different ages and personalities, such as the fictitious Mr. Garr, a sweet 61-year-old man who has been a resident and member of the association for 20 years. He knows the neighborhood and has been through many board changes. He has held several positions and is currently serving as treasurer. You like working with him.

In another building, however, you are working with someone like (the also fictitious) Mr. Chane, a hard-working businessman who is always late for meetings and shares qualities with a gruff miser.

Yet, in another building, Mrs. Curry is a stay-at-home mom with three children who takes minutes of the paperwork. Her personality flashes between hot and cold, and the board’s meetings are long and tedious.

Managing co-ops or condos that are home to residents from varied backgrounds, language groups, and cultural perspectives means working with board members that can sometimes pose distinct challenges, too. You might find yourself talking with an

entrepreneurial Japanese couple who speaks little English or board members in a predominately Hispanic community where Spanish is the primary language.

"Who I'm dealing with can be different from building A to building B," says Koppel. "One building can have nice, easy-going, understandable board members and another can have members who are all self-serving and don't care about anything but what they want. It's always someone else's fault and they aren't taking responsibility for what they need to get done."

Crossing these lines can hinder a successful working environment between board and manager. A tenant may go to a board member and discuss a building issue instead of the manager, or vice versa. These responsibilities should be outlined at the very beginning of the relationship.

Regardless of who is on the board, their personalities, or their languages, you must report to these people, and others, who will analyze and comment on your work and performance, and who will make decisions and prioritize certain tasks.

Though, relationships are not one-sided. Board members have to work with management, too. "Treat us like a team member and not like a jack-of-all-trades, master-of-none," says Koppel. "Everyone can put in input to teach people. Boards should rely on their professionals and don't act like you know something if you don't. If I don't know, I'll say I don't know and try to find the answers."

The board needs to understand that answers may not come at 11:30 p.m. when the manager has just settled down with the family after a long day at work. Calling a manager at that time to ask a question isn't respectful or productive. If the board needs to contact the manager off-hours, it should be by email, or by phone in an emergency.

"It would be helpful for boards and residents who live in the buildings we manage to understand and appreciate the 24/7 nature of a property manager's job," says Graffeo. "We get emergency calls in the middle of the night or on weekends and we are there 24/7 for our clients and the buildings we manage."

## Communication is Key

In every successful relationship, communication is vital. To work effectively, board members must be willing to communicate with each other and with the manager. Often, good communication starts with listening, which aids understanding. It helps if the board is able to stay focused and present clear instructions for the manager.

Marleen Levi is the long-time president of a residential co-op in Brooklyn. She also taught the Effective Interface of Board and Management class at the Council of New York Cooperatives & Condominium's (CNYC) annual Housing Conference, a course that she created 10 years ago after her building was victim to a sponsor who fled with the building's money, stealing security deposits and more.

"There was a two-year investigation, and after we foreclosed on the sponsor, we took over and pulled ourselves up by our own bootstraps," she says. "Over time, I've seen the positives, and the shortcomings, and what is ideal and desired in a property manager. I've seen the shortcomings of poor communication, lack of information, complaints, and the basics."

She created this course to teach communication to both property managers and board members. "Many people I have encountered don't have sharp writing skills," she says. "They either miscommunicate or do not fully communicate. We cover many different styles and teach them about follow ups."

Managers also want board members to understand that they are there to make recommendations and to advise them. "Managers should also stay on top of their fields,

so they can bring any new developments to the board," says Mary Ann Rothman, the CNYC's executive director. "Be respectful and responsive even if the request isn't as brilliant as they think it is. Be prompt with responses."

On the other hand, Rothman suggests that board members increase their working knowledge of the building. "They can be educated on what it takes to run a co-op/condo," says Rothman. "There's a lot to know about the building, the documents as well as city, state and federal rules and laws, so it's a good idea to get educated."

## Relationship Rifts

Boards and managers, like friends and spouses, can bicker. Managers are not happy when members contact them about non-essentials off hours, or harass them with minor concerns. In addition, board officers can change each year, making it difficult for managers to adjust to a variety of styles and personalities. Some managers have to deal with board members who sit on the board to push their own agenda and those who break the rules.

Levi says, however, that fixing what's broken still involves keeping the lines of communication open. "Ask for a meeting to go over some things to get back on track," she says. "If all else fails, maybe it's just not the right personality and the manager is just not connecting the way you want them to."

Whether you're trying to win the Super Bowl, have a happy marriage or run a successful building, working together is vital to your success. "When I talk to management, I point out that the property manager and board relationship really is like a marriage," says Rothman. "You want to choose a management company that dovetails well with yours, but if it doesn't work, talk to the higher-ups in the company and switch agents. Try to be as explicit as possible in pointing out what you perceive to be the problems. It's much

easier to fine-tune what you have than to go through the whole process of finding a new management company.”

Have a plan of action of action, communicate well, and fix problems before they become unmanageable and then celebrate your successes.

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