

Headline: **Conflicts in Strata Corporations and the Bullying Dynamic**

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What do we do when there is conflict in our community? It may be between owners, within the strata council or between the council and owners. All communities have conflict at some point and it is how you address the conflict initially and for ongoing disputes that is important. There are no easy answers, this article will address the types of conflict and how bullying can manifest and suggest some ways of dealing with conflict in your strata community.

Strata community conflicts can have long reaching affects including health and wellbeing. For some the stress can be overwhelming. Owners come from varied cultural/political backgrounds; have different interests, values and are generally unprepared to address conflict in a group setting. This "community" can undergo change when there is conflict. Healthy forms of conflict can improve the community while disruptive conflict or entrenched conflicts can weaken and damage it.

Conflict can take on many faces including inter-personal conflict and conflict within groups. Inter-personal conflict could be one owner causing grief for another owner to the extent that they cannot continue to live in their strata lot. An owner may use intimidation including hammering on their door, physical intimidation or threats. Interestingly, older residents seem to be more vulnerable to bullies and gender can be a factor too. Strata Council's often grapple with how to intervene when there is a conflict between two owners, particularly when it is subjective, such as a lifestyle issue.

An example of group conflict could be one council member who bullies the other council members to follow their example, even if they disagree. This person wants power over the situation. You can also have a group of council members that create a coercive environment and are not receptive to other owners' perspectives. The council intentionally holds the collective and their goal is to meet their agendas. In this situation the council are the *ingroup (in power)* and the *outgroup* are the rest of the owners. However other dynamics can occur such as a group of owners who bully the council causing council members to throw up their hands and decide to resign or not run again. Here, the *outgroup* can take power over the *ingroup*, essentially a reversal of the power dynamics. I've chaired meetings where people are afraid to even run for council because of the ongoing bullying they have experienced from other members of the strata community.

So what causes the conflict that results in bullying tactics? Catalysts for conflict include:

- 1) Power – as referenced above many are motivated by power and want to hold the reigns of control. A group may believe they represent the greater good and that they have the best vision however they tend to trample over the rights of others.
- 2) Values – owners can disagree on collective goals and prioritize differently. This can be particular true when addressing financial issues.
- 3) Interests - motivations for ownership are not all the same. A strata council must act in the best interests of all owners yet individual interests can collide with the collective.

We hear about dysfunctional organizations and strata corporations can become exactly that if the conflict becomes deep rooted. When your community has ongoing systemic conflict where bullying tactics are commonly engaged, this usually represents the efforts of individuals or groups to secure a more favourable long term power position. *Enduring conflict* never really goes away, it just keeps recurring. *Enduring conflict* relates to the structure of the strata corporation including issues such as limited financial resources, conflicting roles, personality traits, owners' values and identity. To address conflict some stratas use avoidance, thinking that if they ignore it the problem will go away. However, the head in the sand approach doesn't work and can escalate the conflict and/or distill it into *enduring conflict*. Another poor approach is to stop all communication with the owner who the dispute is with; thinking that by not communicating the dispute will not escalate. Often we forget that by not responding to communication our silence is making a statement.

Strategies for addressing conflict without your community must be considered in the context of the type of dispute. There is no one size fits all. Inter-personal conflict may have differing remedies than addressing more complex group conflict. The following points focus on group conflict:

- 1) Bullying within the council – develop a protocol to address how discussions will be held in meetings and adopt that protocol. If the bully does not want to engage in discussion of a respectful format you may need to use a third party such as a facilitator or mediator to help develop the protocol. The key is to not make it personal, it is not about the bully, it is about how to have constructive meetings and make the necessary decisions democratically. Once your protocol is in place be strict about enforcement. Some stratas have set up a coin jar and when a council member breaches the protocol they must contribute.
- 2) A powerful council that won't engage/share their power – when the ingroup thinks they are right and the outgroup disagrees, this is a recipe for community discord. Effective communication is essential and rumours that pass through the community can escalate the conflict (and usually lead to personal attacks). Owners may utilize the remedies from the Strata Property Act to petition for a special general meeting and vote on policies and procedures that will address the discord. This may entail bylaws that address conduct and voting processes for general meetings. I know of a strata that has essentially developed a manifesto to address bullying and harassment. Town hall meetings that are facilitated by a neutral can be an opportunity to talk openly and honestly about the frustrations relating to how the strata corporation is managed. It may be necessary for owners to change the leadership and elect council members who work by consensus and listen to the various viewpoints within the community. In the reverse situation where the council is being bullied, essentially the same tactics can be employed, the key is effective communication without making it personal.
- 3) Enduring conflict – when the problem becomes systemic your strata may not be able to ever resolve the conflict, only manage it. Some key steps include recognizing that the conflict exists and then analyzing the existing situation. What is the conflict about? Does it involve values, goals or structures such as resources? Have particular approaches to this type of conflict worked effectively in the past? Encourage communication and feedback, listen and raise questions, remain objective, focus on the issues not the people. Negotiate on the premise that any agreement must be in the best interests of all owners. Bring in professionals at various stages to assist in analysis, communication and negotiation. Understand that while you may be able to address the current conflict it will continue in other forms so you must adapt accordingly.

Because we all come from different backgrounds it can be challenging to find ways to work cohesively within our community. But the benefits to doing so outweigh the difficulties in achieving the goals. All owners in a strata corporation have a responsibility to make sure that the community addresses conflict constructively. Don't be complacent, the dangers in not addressing conflict will bring nothing but regret. When people are happy in their community it is reflected in all aspects of their lives and we need to work towards the best overall health and that includes providing an appropriate vehicle for dialogue when conflicts arise.