



What to Say when Your Side Loses

by Dan Hotchkiss

“The ayes have it.” Curt put down his hand and looked across the table at Priscilla, who also voted “no.” Priscilla smiled, shrugged, and joined the chatter about how to ask the membership to ratify the board’s decision.

Curt was not smiling. By five to two, the board had voted to tear down the ladies’ parlor to make room for a new classroom wing. Curt understood the need, but he felt strongly this was the wrong project at the wrong time. He had said so several times.

Luckily, the congregation also needed to approve the project. Curt was thinking about how to make his arguments again. Surely in the congregation as a whole there were enough who loved that parlor, enough who were unhappy about all the excess spending lately, to put a stop to this new folly.

Priscilla interrupted Curt’s reflections, speaking toward him from across the table: “I am frankly disappointed by this vote,” she said. “But now that the board’s decision has been made, it is our duty as board members to support it whether we agree or not.”

There was a long pause as everybody waited for Curt’s answer. And we will leave them there for now: Curt and Priscilla, marking the two sides of a dilemma that confounds many boards.

A useful way to approach questions of this kind is for the board to make a covenant—a well-known procedure popular since the publication in 2001 of Gil Rendle’s [Behavioral](#)

[Covenants in Congregations](#). A board’s covenant spells out its expectations of board members. It might require such things as regular attendance and respectful dialog at the board table. It might ask board members to attend worship regularly, to contribute generously, and to be available for special duties outside board meetings.

But the toughest issue, often, is the one Priscilla raised with Curt: What should you do when your side loses?

Priscilla speaks for unity: “The board should speak with one voice. Our duty is to advocate for the decision, whether we agree with it or not.” This rule effectively requires the losing members to switch sides after the vote. The reasoning goes like this: however strongly I may feel, our shared concern is for the success of the congregation. Division threatens that success, so leaders need to pull together. If you can’t accept that, you should resign your board position, and then speak as a free, unfettered individual.

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For Curt, freedom is the main point. Why should he have to resign to say what he believes? Don’t congregants who agree with him have a right to know he represented their views on the board? Is it even ethical for Curt to mislead the people who elected him? On small matters, switching sides may not be problematic, but when (as sometimes happens)

the member's opposition is grounded in morality, strong sentiment, or a conviction of superior knowledge, changing sides feels deceptive and wrong.

How can a board decide on a rule, with loyalty on one side of the issue and liberty on the other?

In talking with a lot of real-life Curts and Priscillas, I have made some observations that may help.

One is that Priscilla's point of view is practiced frequently in business boards. It's easy to see why. Disagreements in a business are often about strategies and methods, but rarely about purpose. The purpose of most businesses is comparatively simple: to make money for the owners. Boards argue about product strategy, the choice of CEO, or whether to acquire another company—but once a decision has been made, it is in no one's interest to prolong the struggle. Unity of leadership is a prime value if you think of your congregation as an enterprise whose leaders want success.

Curt's attitude is more at home in politics. Opinions are the currency of politics. It would be shocking if a member of Congress pretended he or she had voted on the winning side. Constituents expect to know—and expect their representatives to keep on fighting when they lose a vote. If, for you, your congregation is a "little commonwealth," you're apt to want to keep its marketplace of opinions open and transparent.

Is a congregation more like a business or a public body? This question is best framed not as an either-or, but as a dilemma or polarity, a balance of two values both of which have relevance.

Like Priscilla, most leaders value the success of their congregations, and know that it depends on people to support it even when it

makes decisions they don't like. As leaders, we want to set a good example—contributing our strong opinions when that is appropriate, and then setting them aside.

Is your congregation more like a business or a public body?

We also admire, to some degree, Curt's passion for what he thinks is right. We want to know, as members of the congregation, that the board at least considered contrary opinions before making a decision. If we are honest, there are some decisions that would make each of us consider leaving, sad though that would make us.

After much discussion, both Curt and Priscilla moved away from their original positions to embrace the board's new rule, permitting members to express dissent about board actions, but only after first affirming the board's leadership and the legitimacy of its process.

At the members' meeting, Curt asked to be recognized. He said, "I want everyone to know that as a member of the board, I voted against this and I lost, fair and square. That is how we do things. If this passes, I'll contribute to the classroom project. But I can't in conscience vote to tear down that old parlor. That is how I voted on the board, and that is how I'm going to vote today as well."

Dan Hotchkiss consults with congregations and other mission-driven groups from his home near Boston. Dan's best-selling Alban book *Governance and Ministry: Rethinking Board Leadership* has helped hundreds of churches, synagogues, and non-profit organizations to streamline their structure and become more mission-focused and effective. www.danhotchkiss.com