

Apathy and Avoiding Conflicts

Simple steps can help boost condo owner participation

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From the American Heritage Dictionary: **Apathy** – (ap'e-the), noun, 1. Lack of interest or concern, especially in important matters. 2. Lack of emotion; impassiveness.

Over the past few months, I have received several calls from unit owners on the board of directors of condominiums. They were concerned about the apathy of owners and of fellow board members, and how it results in one or two board members controlling the meetings. Apathy in a condominium, whether at the board level or as owners overall, happens for a number of reasons. But it always ends with the same results – a few people dictating or controlling the decision-making process.

Just as condo ownership has become a popular choice among home-buyers, it has also attracted new people who are choosing to get involved in how their condominiums are being run. This is a good thing that's well overdue. But it is often met with resistance by existing owners and board members, deterring people from contributing their time and talents. In many condominiums, the "old school" owners are not open to new, relatively inexperienced owners taking on their duties.

There is a philosophy that in the name of continuity, the old board members are best at continuing the directorship of the corporation. A good procedures and policies manual could solve this one. Also at play are belief systems and cultural factors. If you take a look at any cosmopolitan city across North America, you will find cultural differences within it, such as the Italians, Germans or Chinese. With similar attitudes about things like family values, people within these cultural communities share similar beliefs of how to make decisions and solve problems.

But when a person buys into a condominium, their "community" is made of people with different values and beliefs. This can result in one owner butting heads with another – and before you know it, owners are staying behind closed doors wanting to avoid the whole situation. It is a rare individual who can walk into a lion's den and take charge.

During the past 30 years, I have observed how such factors affect how condos function. I have concluded that the only sensible and affordable solution to merging all these differences is tolerance, acceptance of difference, and willingness to find a common solution that involves all owners equally. Having said this, I do realize how difficult it can be for people to accept differences in others. I recognize that this can be a tall order.

I would not be making such a statement if I did not know that this works, every time, when the group as a whole is determined and willing to participate in the process. I am often asked what to do when a board that is working towards this style of community involvement invites owners to participate – and no one shows any

interest. Although this can be discouraging, things do progress over time. The key is to keep inviting owners to participate, and then be patient:

Make the request interesting and important to each owner.

Social invitations are often the least attended because people living in condominiums often have busy lifestyles, and they often don't have the time or desire to socialize with their condo neighbours.

Requesting input through questionnaires may be more effective for some condominiums.

Remember to be respectful of each other's time and only send questionnaires when there is real business involved. For example, a condo board could be considering increasing the number of times the common hallways and lobbies are vacuumed, potentially resulting in increased condo fees. The questionnaire could ask the owners if they prefer to pay extra, keep the situation as it is, or if someone wants to vacuum the hall between the regular contracted times.

In other words, the trick is to involve them in helping find solutions, instead of simply giving them a notice that they must now pay extra for cleaning the corridors more frequently. State in the questionnaire what the board will do if no input is received.

Of course, the board must realize that it must respect the input of people who do respond, even if it is only one person. Once the owners get used to being heard when they make suggestions, they will be more willing to get involved – and before you know it, the apathy will be gone.

In condominiums where apathy is the overriding problem – whether it be the owners in general or the board itself – the only solution is to create opportunities for everyone to feel welcome, valued and important to the functioning of the property as a whole. In cases where a board member or two are controlling the meeting, the other members need to speak up and vote on decisions according to what they think, instead of letting one or two take over.

For those board members who are being silent and not willing to speak up when they need to, the best solution is for them to resign. They are not representing what is best for the condominium as a whole, which is the main responsibility and expectation of a board member.

Owners who do not get involved should understand that they are required to live by the decisions made by the board, whether they agree with them or not. How is this possible in a real-life condominium?

- Start by holding a meeting of the owners and invite them to get involved in the idea of planning the upcoming year.
- Involve everyone who wants to be involved.
- Be sure to leave personalities out of the formula and design a framework for involvement that works for your style and type of condominium.

This could be a series of committees from landscaping to social activities, special projects, communication, security and policies. Or it could be an operations and procedures manual that clearly outlines the process for questions to be answered, information to be shared, and access to the decision-making process.

This is an opportunity to get creative and pull together as a group with one main objective: a well operated condominium home.

It is a good Idea to hire a facilitator who is not related to any owners to run the meeting.

Apathy is the result of the majority of owners not feeling included, needed or valued in the operation of the condominium. I can't think of anyone who would be enthusiastic about attending a meeting just to be told what is going to be imposed on them. This is how it feels to owners who are asked to attend an information meeting or general meeting where a board tells them what is going to happen, instead of inviting owners to provide input and contribute.

It is a simple matter of presentation and willingness to hear what the owners as a majority prefer, instead of having a few owners dictating to the others. Ultimately, the board of directors is responsible for the condominium's operation and business decisions – and when seeking consensus is properly done, everyone feels included.

The condominium community becomes strong and harmonious. In the end, owners are able to sell their units with ease because of this type of condominium is attractive to people looking to buy into the condo lifestyle.