

Controlling Mad Dogs and the Erosion of Trust

By

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Who Are These “Mad Dogs”???

My board and the management team are dealing with a couple of Mad Dogs at the moment. These characters are running about, foaming at the mouth, yapping constantly, nipping at the heels of board members, committee members, management and staff. Some of this is good---after all, there's a kernel of truth at the center of any bitch and any moan---but some of it is can be very, very bad. They infect an entire member / staff community and trust, that most fragile of commodities and the most fundamental tool in the successful governance of my or any other club, can be compromised or destroyed.

More often than not these characters are clever sorts with too much time on their hands and too little to do. The club has become their job. They are the guard dogs of “the good” and are rabid in their search for the bad. They slink about, lurking in the shadows yet visible to the members and staff, omnipresent.

Mad Dogs may be loners in that their madness, but Mad Dogs truly love to hunt in packs. The pack inspires them. The pack provides moral and psychological support. They want to become the “Alpha Pooch” and their histrionics bring attention to themselves, providing a sense of self and purpose otherwise absent from their lives. They can always say “the pack agrees” and is ready to bite, whether the pack is so inclined or not.

Then there is another type of Mad Dog called the Truly Deranged Mad Dog. This character is the one who thinks a thought, imagines a story and believes it to be true whether it is or not. They've no agenda. They really do live in their own warped imaginings where they're the King of Prussia one moment and a grand prix race car driver the next. In their mind, what they think and then say is reality. They live on a different astral plane. The Truly Deranged Mad Dogs are so mad that most members see them as such and are ignored. They blather on, heard by many but harmless.

But the truly dangerous Deranged Mad Dog is the one who's on the Board of Directors, has some type of moral authority because of it are perceived to reflect

“The Board” when they speak. These characters are considered to be authority figures with the inside scoop. This is the Truly Deranged Stealth Mad Dog. But when you put a Truly Deranged Mad Dog in this position, watch out---they don’t have the facts so they make them up. They want to get out of confrontations over Board decisions and they contrive stories to deflect the blame for those choices from themselves to others. They disparage members and truly believe what they’re saying. Their confidence, their style and their delivery are such that people actually believe them! They may be the blonde haired, blue eyed boy from the prominent family, long time member, alumni of all the right schools, approachable and pleasant. But they have a complete disconnect from reality (or perhaps from the ethical imperative!) and lack a clear understanding between what they’ve so casually said and the damage they can do both to others and to that most precious of governing tools, trust. These Truly Deranged Stealth Mad Dogs can really bruise you since the world listens to them and believes! It’s scary knowing that the Truly Deranged Stealth Mad Dog doesn’t even know they’re mad.

Mad Dogs are social creatures. In order to bite they need an audience to witness the biting. These animals tend not to write letters---Who can see them doing it? Who can praise their efforts?---but slink about in search of receptive ears. They have stories to tell about things they’ve seen and they are compelling, persistent and sometimes even convincing in their delivery.

Every club has these characters---Mad Dogs, Truly Deranged Mad Dogs and Truly Deranged Stealth Mad Dogs.

The Erosion of Trust:

Mad dogs do bad things to “trust.” Trust is the belief that future decisions will be made in a way consistent with past decisions. There is “good trust” and “bad trust.”

Good Trust is when members think that the good values used in the past will be used in the future---they trust in your consistency. “They conducted surveys before deciding on a clubhouse assessment in the past and they listened to the feedback received. They’ll do so in the future.”

Bad Trust is when members think that the bad values you used in the past will be used in the future---they trust in your consistency. “They conducted no surveys in the past before deciding on a clubhouse assessment---they simply told us what they had decided to do. They’ll do the same in the future.”

Losing trust is easy---all it takes is an inconsistent decision, a rumor, a stumbling explanation---and restoring lost trust is difficult.

Mad Dogs make members question the board's motives and intents, boards to question the manager's, managers to question their lieutenants' and on down the line to the lowest employee in the organization. They erode trust, they interfere with the maintenance of trust and they block its restoration once lost.

What Provokes these "Mad Dogs?"

Mad Dogs are easy to provoke.

Some of the things that make them rabid have nothing whatsoever to do with the club. Their wife may have run off with the postman, their job may have evaporated, their Jaguar may have been totaled or they may have discovered that their number three girlfriend is about to have twins. These aren't short term issues, they're not easy to resolve, and they fester in the Mad Dog. They bite the club because the club allows them to bite.

Sometimes Mad Dogs truly believe that they know "The Good" and have a compelling need to let the world know they know. They've run a business during an economic downturn (though the business may have gone bankrupt in the process!) and are now ready to see how well or poorly the board and management do it at their club.

Sometimes the Mad Dog is right. But their A.Q. (annoyance quotient) may exceed their I.Q. (intelligence quotient) or their communications skills may be weak---they think one thing and say another---and their ideas get lost in the clutter.

Assume that these characters are rabid, ready to bite, needing controversy to fill the holes in their otherwise dull and mundane existences. What stirs them into a frenzy, foaming at the mouth?

Mad Dogs go wild when they hear different stories from different authority types about the same thing. I just had an incident where a well meaning board member--who we've come to believe is a Truly Deranged Stealth Mad Dog--- wrongly explained the board's thinking on a Calcutta event. The Mad Dog who was listening then came to me as club manager to "investigate" this snippet, got the truth about the board's reasoning and then had a field day telling others that nobody knew what they were talking about. Who's telling the truth? The issue was not the truth but the inconsistency of the message---they're trying to smoke me.

Mad Dogs go wild when they see different strokes for different folks. Two members known as “bad boys” (crude but pleasant, drunks but not combative) were recently suspended for nine months for telling dirty stories (which they thought were a howl) to a woman staffer and a member’s wife. Good riddance to two very rotten apples. But a board several years ago chose not to suspend a long-time “authentic” member who viciously and with bad intent called a senior woman manager a truly foul name. Do the “rude and the crude” get a different form of justice from the “old guard authentic member”? Trust begins to evaporate when the Mad Dogs think they do.

Mad Dogs go wild when they witness decency shown those who deserve no decency. Mad Dogs want the bad guys to pay for their transgressions. Fact is, most members do. So when the bad guys go free, or are given a slap on the wrist, the Dogs begin to howl. And members will listen, because they’re as annoyed as the Mad Dogs who’ve begun to howl.

Mad Dogs go wild when they receive smoky explanations as to why, how and when. They want “the straight scoop” when things go wrong. Mad Dogs can smell “smoke”---after all they’re clever types---and can tell when the board or manager are trying to obscure the facts with a lot of rhetoric.

Mad Dogs go wild when the “big cheese policy makers” go into hiding after making big decisions over big issues that are divisive and controversial. Decisions are made in the boardroom but need to be explained and defended in the light of day. Mad Dogs want to bite when they hear about decisions and can’t find a board member to talk to at the club.

Mad Dogs go wild when they hear silence in the face of big hairy rumors. Mad Dogs love it when rumors start flying---fact is, they love to rev up the rumor mill and relish the opportunity to stir up the pot---and none of the decision makers choose to confront those rumors head on. It’s like fresh meat for the Dogs.

Mad Dogs are easy to provoke because they’re itching for a fight. Boards and managers feed them unknowingly when they ignore the very things that provoke them.

How Do “Mad Dogs” Bite?

Mad Dogs eat away at trust. They create suspicion and discord between members and management, members and boards, boards and management. They make people question the “Great Why” of a decision. Ultimately governance---

including both the board as policy makers and the management as administrators--
- is based on the governed trusting those who govern. Erode that trust and the governed become praetorians, enforcing dictates that the seething masses reject.

Mad Dogs get personal---they name names and cast aspersions. They capture center stage by talking less about policy than about people. They want to infect their listeners with distrust, a disease that creeps through the psyche and causes the blood to boil. “The general manager, who’s known to lie, cheat and steal from orphans and widows, actually changed the Minutes to allow himself five months of paid vacation.” That’s the sort of thing that angers members, sows discord amongst the membership and loses managers their jobs.

Mad Dogs talk to different supervisors and sow rumors between them. They know certain staff well enough to “talk honestly” to them about people, or to “ask the hard questions” about peer performance. They know these contacts will speak to other staff, forward those rumors, undermining trust at every level. Then they’ll go to the next supervisor and use what they learned in the previous encounter to spin some tale that provokes and annoys that supervisor about the one just spoken to. Within twenty minutes the entire employee team knows what’s been said, all take sides and chaos then reigns. Everyone becomes demoralized, stressed, angry. Trust evaporates.

Mad Dogs corral board members separately and use their “insider info” to plant the seed of distrust between them and other board members, between them and the management team and between them and the membership at large. E-mails start swirling about and the President ends up trying to stop the rumors before they infect and fester. The club’s governance team is vulnerable, their relationships public and very fragile.

Mad Dogs bite with words, tenacity, access and spin. They nip at everyone’s heels, make everyone edgy and angry and prime the organization for an internal collapse. Trust is the cement that holds it all together and once the bonds of trust are weakened the entire governance system begins to stumble. The club can go from “love-fest” to “suspicion-fest” in the blink of an eye.

Muzzle, Neuter and Put ‘Em In Cages

When you approach a Mad Dog you need to acknowledge some of the ground rules of containment.

Understand that with Mad Dogs there are no private conversations. You need to acknowledge that a Mad Dog, when sworn to secrecy, will race from your office

to bite and infect others with whatever juicy tidbits they got from you during their encounter.

Accept that with Mad Dogs there are no casual conversations. Anything you say, no matter how inconsequential or innocent, will be held against you and will be spun to suit the purposes of the Mad Dog in question.

Acknowledge that Mad Dogs hear what that want to hear, see what they want to see and that they'll see and hear what they fear most. If they're scared of a dues increase, whatever you say will convince them that one's coming.

Bad things happen frequently, but truly big, bad things happen less often. Mad Dogs love bad things when they happen since truly big, bad things are remembered forever. Mad Dogs will use the uproar over admitting woman as full members a decade ago to show how radical and extreme the board was, is and will forever be.

No matter how proud you are of "good deeds done," Mad Dogs will always find sinister motives behind good deeds. Beat the budget last year? You must have screwed the members by not giving the right hors d'oeuvres at the right time in the right place with the right frequency. Spent more on hors d'oeuvres than budgeted because you made more than you expected on private functions and wanted to give something back to the members? Then you've thrown away member dues like drunken sailors. You can't win.

Because Mad Dogs are truly wild and rabid creatures, their reaction to your comments will be will be a zillion times bigger than the comment made. You mention, during the debate over hors d'oeuvres, that the more reasoned members object to certain members making dinner for their families from the free hors d'oeuvres. Bingo---the Mad Dog spreads the word that the board and management team has called all members cheapo members, that they're about to cut out all hors d'oeuvres and that they're considering disciplinary hearings for the Smiths, the Cooks and the Youngbloods for excess consumption of hot hors d'oeuvres in public.

Mad dogs snarl less frequently, bite less harshly when they and those in the pack see that the decision making process is fair. If you dramatize that members are enfranchised; that they can be heard and that their voices are being solicited; that the decision is arrived at in a reasoned, thoughtful and consistent way; that a clear explanation is given for the decision; and that they have every reason to suppose that future decisions will be dealt with in the same reasoned way, then they'll more willing to accept the decisions made, will growl less fiercely, infect less virulently, slink about more slowly.

When you see a Mad Dog, the last thing you should do is hide behind a tree on the seventh fairway. Arm yourself with the facts (remember that the truth will set you free!) and go pro-active---approach the character and offer up your time to discuss any and all concerns they may have. The key issue is to have all the facts, to anticipate questions in advance and to project the confidence that comes with having thought through an issue before acting.

Mad Dogs spread infection rapidly, but well timed member mailings are faster still. Remember, Mad Dogs are territorial and are therefore quite local in their impact---at least in the beginning. Remember the power of the pen to explain and to defuse issues with the larger club community.

Town Hall meetings can help people vent. Jump into the fire by advertising open forums to discuss specific issues. This defuses the “one issue agenda” of so many Mad Dogs. A couple times a year you can go one step further and hold a presidential press conference for the discussion of any and all issues that might be raised, accepting unscripted questions thrown out willy nilly by Mad Dogs and their packs. Just remember to muzzle the Truly Deranged Stealth Mad Dogs who may be sitting with you on the board!

Get the Board and Manager out and about. Combat Mad Dogs with the walk and talk. Let the membership and the Mad Dogs know that the Decision Makers are walking about, open to conversation, approachable, ready to respond, eager to listen, ready to communicate.

Make sure that the General Manager has frequent staff meetings both for the senior staff and for the entire general staff. Have the Manager address the issues raised by the Mad Dogs. Let people vent. Explain. Guide. Lead them beyond the Mad Dog’s infectious bite.

Search and Destroy

The General Manager is the Board’s Hunter-Gatherer of facts, rumors, scandal and intrigue. The G.M. and their lieutenants should be out “in the trenches” searching out the Mad Dogs for the Board of Directors. They should communicate their observations immediately to the Board. The manager’s role is to prime the board with the personalities and the issues, then arm them with the knowledge weapons they need to both attack and to defend against Mad Dogs.

If you see them early enough you can limit their impact. If you confront them and their pack with the facts, you'll control the amount of yapping and biting and infecting they will do.

And remember to tell Mad Dogs, Truly Deranged Mad Dogs and Truly Deranged Stealth Mad Dogs that Samuel Taylor Coleride had it right when he said:

***“Advice is like snow; the softer it falls, the longer it dwells upon,
and the deeper it sinks into the mind.”***