

Fix That Squeaky Wheel

How to discipline difficult group members

By Chelsea Greenwood, assistant editor

Leading an efficient student organization can be a lot like taking a road trip—and all your members are along for the ride. The whole group shares a common destination, but you're responsible for getting everyone there. While you may have a competent and attentive navigator, sometimes the rest of your crew is a bunch of back-seat drivers. When members slack off, challenge your authority, or spread a contagious bad attitude, these five steps will help you discipline them and determine when someone is just a "dead end."

Map Your Route

To reach a goal, first you have to plan your route by firmly establishing the rules and expectations of the organization early in the semester. "You as the leader have to have the initial road map," says Victor Gonzalez, motivational speaker and creator of the "Leadership and Personal Development" series. "When you show somebody where you're going on this map, they'll either agree with you or let you know what they think is wrong."

Although many leaders find oral agreements sufficient, written contracts keep expectations clear by outlining them in black and white. "Using a contract that lays out the rules and expectations from the beginning is critical," says Devin Kinyon, advisor for the Cal Corps Public Service Center at the **University of California, Berkeley**. Have new members carefully read the contract and sign only if they completely agree with its provisions. Most contracts contain clauses where members pledge their full commitment, promise to produce quality work, and agree to specific time quotas.

A former student leader himself, Kinyon says it's crucial "to remember that any contract must be a living document." Discuss the contract with your group, and consider suggestions for revisions.

Use a Compass

If members diverge from their course, a refresher e-mail or memo can remind them of their focus and keep them on track. "Initially, give members the benefit of the doubt," says Chandra Russon, president of the Eating Disorder Reach-Out Service at **Vassar College** in New York. "Assume that if one member is breaking the rules, others might also out of ignorance rather than an intention to violate the group." The message should reinforce group goals and emphasize the need for cooperation. If a member repeatedly arrives late to meetings, try sending a general e-mail to the group recapping the contract's clause about promptness.

During the next week or so, recognize members who actively adhere to this principle or show improved behavior. "Have awards to recognize people who meet expectations or excel," says Gerry Muir, associate dean of student life at **Drew University** in New Jersey. "It keeps the group's standards fresh in people's minds while reinforcing positive efforts."

Check Under the Hood

Once an individual brings negativity into your organization, it can quickly spread to all the members. "It seems like there's always one disruptor, especially in college groups," Gonzalez says. "It's usually a 'Mr. Know-it-all' who always has an

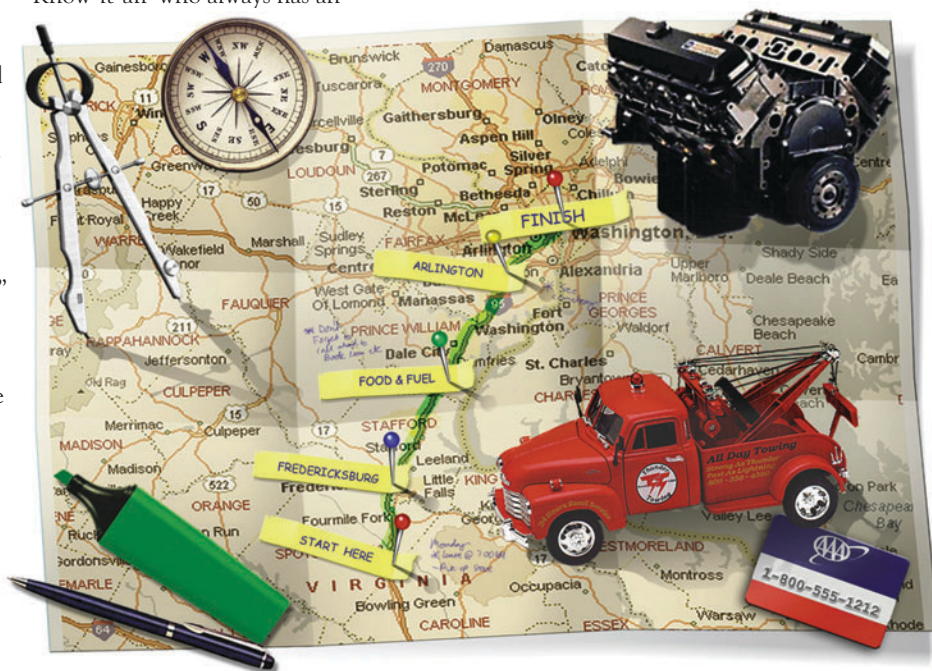
Call AAA

If the member doesn't improve her behavior after your talk, it may be time to bring in a third party. "Sometimes, I need to turn to a higher authority when I no longer feel in control of the situation," Russon says. Advisors represent both authority and neutrality—a powerful combination that sends a clear message that the troublesome member's attitude has become a serious enough problem that you're working actively to solve.

"Advisors are just a wonderful resource," says Mike Domitrz, an author and educational speaker for sexual assault awareness. "They're called an *advisor*—they're there to give *advice*."

Have It Towed

When none of the above steps yield an attitude adjustment, it's time to let that member go. Make sure that he fully comprehends how his behavior was detrimental, how he failed to meet group



opinion but never does anything."

Take this guy aside and ask him why he's having problems and how you can help. Remind him of the contract and ask how his attitude has changed since he joined the group. Bringing a list of grievances can keep the conversation on track and prevent it from becoming a personal attack. "Talk to the member and be open about how his behavior is affecting your ability to run the group," Kinyon says. Documenting the date, issue, and outcome of the conversation may prove necessary to oust the member from the group if his attitude worsens down the road.

While it's important to keep the details of such confrontations confidential, it's equally important to let other group members know you're dealing with the problem. "I'd never scold a member in front of everybody," Gonzalez says. "At the same time, let everybody know you're trying to help that person."

expectations, and why he's being asked to leave. "What's key is to talk to the person so he understands why we have a standard to which we're all accountable," Muir says. "Accountability is vital for the strength of a group as well as for an individual."

Make it easy for him to step down and don't discuss the details with other group members. "It's not a fun talk—it's like firing somebody," Domitrz says. "It's not a personal thing between you and that member, so try to keep it positive, and let him know it's okay for him to leave." Keep things professional and other group members will appreciate your candor. "Letting people go is a healthy thing if you can bring in new blood that brings in positive energy," Domitrz says. **SL**

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