



When Board Leadership Becomes a Risk: A Decision Tree for Board Leaders

This decision tree is designed to help nonprofit boards determine **when and how to act** if a board chair or other board leader is causing harm to the organization. It assumes good faith, but prioritizes duty of care, loyalty, and obedience above comfort or avoidance.

START HERE

Step 1. Is the concern about style or conduct?

Conduct, safety, conflicts, or governance failures would include:

- Safety policy violations
- Conflicts of interest not disclosed or recused
- Verbal abuse or intimidation
- Reputational harm
- Governance breakdown (loss of quorum, process manipulation)

→ Proceed immediately to Step 2.↓

Style / preference issues would include:

- Disagreement over leadership style
- Communication preferences
- Differing strategic opinions

→ Provide coaching, feedback, or facilitation.

→ Reassess periodically.

Step 2. Does the board have actual knowledge of harm or risk?

YES — known and documented

→ Inaction = failure of oversight
→ Proceed to Step 3.↓

NO — concerns not yet surfaced

→ Formally document and surface concerns *now*.
→ Then proceed to Step 3.

Step 3. Is harm ongoing or escalating? Ask:

- Are staff safety, morale, or retention affected?
- Is the ED shielding staff from board behavior?
- Is reputational or legal exposure increasing?

YES

→ Immediate action is required.
→ Proceed to Step 4.↓

NO (but credible risk exists).

→ Set timeline and oversight.
→ Reassess within 30–60 days.

Step 4. Can this board leader continue safely *right now*?

NO

→ Leadership change is required.
→ Proceed to Step 5.↓

YES, with clear conditions:

- Written expectations
- Defined oversight
- Short review window (30–60 days)
- Documented consequences

→ Reassess quickly.

Step 5. Implement Interim Leadership (Do Not Stall)

Choose *one*:

- Two interim co-chairs
- Executive committee shares chair duties
- Temporary figurehead with limited authority

Purpose: protect staff, stabilize governance, and reduce risk

→ Choose a Step 5 option, then proceed to Step 6.↓

Step 6. Assess Board Capacity Honestly. Ask:

- Do we lack the courage to govern in hard moments?
- Are we avoiding action to preserve comfort?
- Does board composition need strengthening?

YES — Capacity gaps exist

- Recruit governance-ready board members
- Pause internal referrals that reinforce dysfunction
- Support ED in board realignment
- Proceed to Step 7.↓

NO

- Contact the Nonprofit Snapshot and let's talk about what has led you here: snapshot@nonprofitsnapshot.org.

Step 7. Is the Executive Director being harmed by inaction? Indicators would include:

- Acting as board chair “caretaker”
- Shielding staff from board behavior
- Experiencing burnout or moral distress

YES

- The board is out of fiduciary alignment.
- Immediate correction is required.

NO

- Continue monitoring, document actions.

FINAL DECISION POINT

ACT or ACCEPT THE RISK

Acting = discomfort, accountability, mission protection.

Not acting = staff harm, ED burnout, reputational and legal exposure.

There is no neutral option.