

The Party's Over — Now What?

Maintaining Perspective & Balance in the Wake of a Terminated Business Relationship

By Thomas L. Willis, CMCA, PCAM

The December issue of *Quorum*TM included a fine article that outlined a process to effectively handle the termination of a management contract and transition to a new one. The article was accurate and valuable. It also reminded me that we can be technically proficient in handling transitions without always giving full consideration of the human factors that might be involved.

Whether we are an employee of a management company, an onsite manager of a community association, or a professional service provider, odds are at some time in our careers we will be involved in a business relationship that for one reason or another reaches the end of its useful life. We shake hands, wish each other well, and move on. But in reality, doing business is a human endeavor, and damage can be done if we don't recognize and address the mental and emotional toll that can sometimes linger from a "business break-up."

Over the years it has saddened me to watch managers, in particular, come away scarred from difficult client relationships. Those who throw themselves into their work are hit hardest. Despite what they may view as Herculean efforts in less-than-favorable circumstances, they come away feeling unappreciated and often abused. Professional detachment to the point of uncaring, over-defensiveness, diminished standards of performance or conduct, and profound cynicism are only a few of the telltale signs of unhealthy scarring.

Fortunately for me, I have had the opportunity to reflect on these things with people of uncommon wisdom. They have shared with me pearls that have been valuable in professional and personal life. After sharing one such

reflective moment with Robin Manougian, she asked me to write three of them down so she could think about them later. One thing led to another, and this article was born.

Lesson #1: **"When the Devil says fire is hot, he knows what he is talking about."** Credit for this one goes to perhaps my primary professional mentor, Arthur Dubin. He shared this with me some years ago while we were

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working with a particularly unreasonable new board president. Though I have to state for the record that the statement assumes certain theological concepts that I personally believe to be rather spurious, the words create a picture that makes an important point: While being deluged by unfair and possibly irrational attacks, it is very easy to miss a salient and accurate critique. We may feel compelled to defend ourselves as if we were perfect or minimize shortcomings in the face of intense scrutiny. It might seem like our client expects us to be perfect. We're not, and even minor issues, if not identified and corrected quickly, can become major issues. If criticism is true, it is true regardless of the identifying source. The challenge is hearing it.

But balance is needed here, which leads us to Lesson #2: **"Glance in the rear-view mirror anytime you apply the brakes"**. I got that one in a driver improvement class many moons ago. The lesson literally saved the in-

structor's life one day on the beltway. He glanced in the mirror as traffic slowed and noticed that the truck driver behind him wasn't paying attention. He took corrective action, changed lanes, and avoided the deadly rear-end collision that befell the driver that had just moments before been in front of him. When things stop in front of us, like the end of a business relationship, it pays to look behind just long enough to learn the lessons necessary to avoid getting rear ended – and then focus forward, taking action to get where we are going. If we fail to focus forward in a timely manner, we will figuratively wreck. It doesn't pay to beat ourselves up over the past, especially a past over which we had no control. Learn from the past and move on.

Which leads us to Lesson #3, courtesy of Mike Gilmore. He has a well-earned reputation as one who has seen it all in this business. He can be a great sounding board. One afternoon he let me whine on for several minutes about a situation and then said, **"You can't let negative people rent space in your mind."** Of course he was right. Even if we successfully apply lessons one and two and have done everything we should do, sometimes those negative comments play back in our memories and we might dwell on them. There is no benefit. We can't control others, we can only control ourselves, and yet we give up some of that control when we allow others' negativity to reside in our head.

It's not easy to maintain a dedication to quality in a balanced, healthy way. It is the best way to be good to our clients and good to ourselves at the same time. Imagine that – a win-win.

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