

Working Effectively with Especially Challenging Behaviors, Part Six

By Diana Leafe Christian

“You’d all better watch out!,” a member I’ll call Olive declared loudly, leaping out of her chair in our meeting, visibly upset.

Our facilitator had just stopped her, quite courteously, from continuing to argue about an issue we’d just finished discussing, and said he was moving on to our next agenda item.

Someone hesitantly asked Olive what she meant by saying, “Watch out!” Was she actually threatening to do something, and if so, what? What should we watch out *for*?

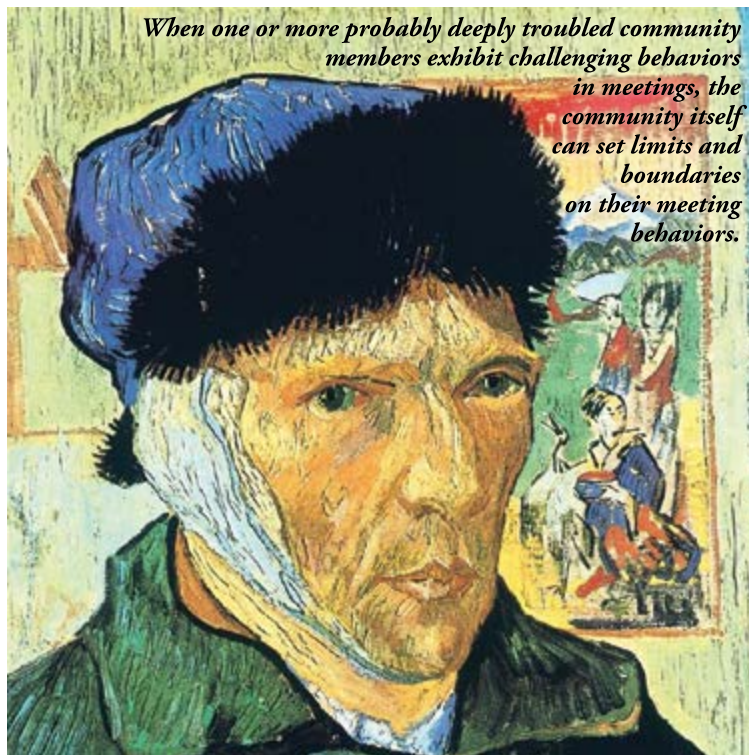
“*What should you watch...out...for?!*,” she repeated, outraged, glaring around the circle.

“That you all don’t *trip over your own stupidity!!*”

Outrage, threats, insults. Arrogance, outbursts, resentment. This is what we’d come to expect in many of our meetings. Olive¹ seemed to assume her values and lifestyle choices were the standards for our community, no matter that we’d never made a decision to adopt her values and lifestyle choices. Nevertheless, she became incensed whenever we violated them.²

And while Olive often behaved this way in meetings, and interpersonally outside of meetings, sometimes “targeting” other community members she resented (see fourth article, issue #197), she had admirable qualities too. She was a beloved sustainability teacher and a mentor to several of our young women. She led rituals and songs honoring the Earth and Nature. She facilitated meetings and was good at it. Many community members appreciated how she contributed to the community, although they were aware of her other side too.

In those days we used classic, traditional consensus, meaning anyone could block a proposal if they believed it would harm the community. But we didn’t know enough about consensus at the time to ask the person to explain how approving the proposal would harm us, and to require their explanation to make *sense* to the rest of us—to seem reasonable. And while no one blocked proposals in those days, Olive often let us know she didn’t support a proposal that everyone else wanted, and implied or sometimes outright declared she very well *might* block it. When this happened our facilitator wouldn’t test for consensus, because the facilitator and everyone else in the meeting believed the proposal couldn’t pass anyway, so why bother testing for consensus? Sometimes when people would talk about an idea informally at a meal or a social gathering, Olive would let them know she didn’t approve of it, and implied that if anyone were to actually propose the idea, she would block it. Thus many ideas never actually became proposals for fear of what Olive might do. And while she



When one or more probably deeply troubled community members exhibit challenging behaviors in meetings, the community itself can set limits and boundaries on their meeting behaviors.

Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear, Vincent Van Gogh, 1889, Courtauld Galleries, London.



If left unchecked, the challenging behaviors of meeting participants can be so disruptive, so consistently, that increasing numbers of members stop going to meetings altogether.

consistently presented herself as victimized by and powerless in the community, with her energy of menace and implied threats to block popular ideas, she was actually the most powerful person here. In those days, given both her status as a teacher and mentor and her power-over behaviors in meetings, Olive was in fact the uncrowned Queen of our Community.

What Are “Especially Challenging Behaviors”?

As described in the first five articles of this series (see genus.net/DLC), “especially challenging behaviors” in community are like those of Dwight, described in the first article: disdainful and contemptuous, lying, and behaving heartlessly towards others. And the behaviors of Mavis, often overbearing and harsh yet unable to tolerate attempts to give her feedback. And like Griswald (second article): self-centered, lacking empathy, and expressing rage, hostility, and vengeance against his community. And Eldred (third article): outraged, resentful, and holding a grudge for years; Olive and Andraste (fourth article): unrelenting hostility and contempt towards those they targeted; and Hugo and Umberto (fifth article): aggressive and manipulative yet ever-victimized, while grooming the most vulnerable, self-doubting fellow community members to be their loyal followers or “minions.”

Mental health professionals call these “narcissistic” attitudes and behaviors. (See list, p. 55.) These aren’t the occasional behaviors that many of us can fall into on a bad day, but behaviors that recur frequently. Yet people who exhibit them typically do only *some* of them—their particular cluster of these behaviors—while other people do other clusters of behaviors. Further, people with these behaviors often exhibit them only sometimes,

and often only with certain people, whom mental health professionals call their “targets.”

Since most community members *don’t* exhibit these behaviors, it can be disorienting and confusing when we find them in our group. But when one or more people consistently and frequently behave this way it can have a devastating effect on other community members, and on the whole group, like Olive’s behaviors in our community.

You Owe Me!

One result of the classic, traditional consensus that many communities practice is the mistaken belief that because a proposal can’t be passed unless everyone approves it (except those who stand aside), then if anyone feels upset about decisions made in a meeting they hadn’t attended, or even another member’s actions, the group has somehow “violated consensus.” And therefore they are obligated to hold one or more whole-group meetings to accommodate the offended member. They believe that, as “a consensus community,” they must make sure no one ever feels upset—that they owe *anyone upset over a decision* whole-group discussions to somehow work it out. And while this belief is not in fact a tenet of consensus, like many communities using classic, traditional consensus as my community did at the time, we truly believed this.

And Olive was our most frequently upset member. In her view, many of us kept “harming the community” by taking actions that offended her because they violated her personal values and lifestyle choices, which she assumed were—or should be—our whole community’s shared values and lifestyle choices.

The Offending Cow. Once a young couple bought a milk cow so they could make buttermilk and yogurt to save on their food bill. This was in line with our community values and intentions, as we aspired to live simply and frugally, and our founders had assumed various members would start onsite farming enterprises, including raising livestock. Also, most of were omnivores, so consuming dairy products onsite violated no community agreements. Nevertheless, Olive, a vegan, demanded a whole-group meeting because she was adamantly opposed to any of us raising livestock, which she saw as animal slavery. The couple saving money by owning a cow upset her terribly. Even though Olive ostensibly knew our community values around farms and livestock, she nevertheless demanded, and got, a whole-group meeting to discuss the offending cow.

The Offending Well. Another time one of our neighborhoods got community permission to drill a well as their water source. This allowed our community to still meet state requirements about the maximum number of residents who could share any one onsite water source. Because other neighborhoods

Olive was in fact the uncrowned Queen of our Community.

“Our committee is doing better now than in all the years since we started.”

had already tapped the nearby springs and this neighborhood wasn't near a spring, the only way they could have water—and our community could stay within the law—was to drill a well. Olive had been out of town when we gave the neighborhood permission to drill the well. When she learned of this decision she was outraged and demanded a meeting to stop the well. She was in touch with what the Earth wanted and needed, she told us. We should never *take*—that is, *steal*—water from our Mother by drilling, but only receive water from Her as a gift given freely by streams and springs. If the neighborhood drilled their well we would not only violate the principles of Permaculture, but would also violate our Mother. And while our community bases its land-use patterns on Permaculture principles, the ideas about stealing or receiving water from the Earth are Eco-Feminism principles, not Permaculture principles, and we'd never agreed to practice Eco-Feminism.

The Offending Community. Another time she and two of her women supporters called for an actual strike against our community. No one should facilitate meetings or take minutes anymore, they said, until our community paid hourly wages to facilitators and minute-takers, who were usually women, and who, like most others doing tasks for the community, were volunteers fulfilling community labor requirements. We should strike, Olive and her supporters believed, because while our community paid an hourly wage for members, usually men, to fell trees and build roads, and some us hired community members, who were always men, to build their cabins and homes, there were no onsite paying jobs for women. Their assumption was our community *owed* women members a way to earn a living onsite, since, after all, men could make a living here. Why should women do the unpaid “women's jobs”? (Nowadays both women and men are tree-fellers, road-builders, construction workers, meeting facilitators, and minute-takers.) If we all stopped doing any work for the community, including not building roads, facilitating meetings, or taking minutes, Olive and her supporters declared in their strike document, we would force our community to pay women to facilitate meetings and take minutes. It was as if they saw our members as employees who should go on strike against Management. Except of course, we were *all* the Management.

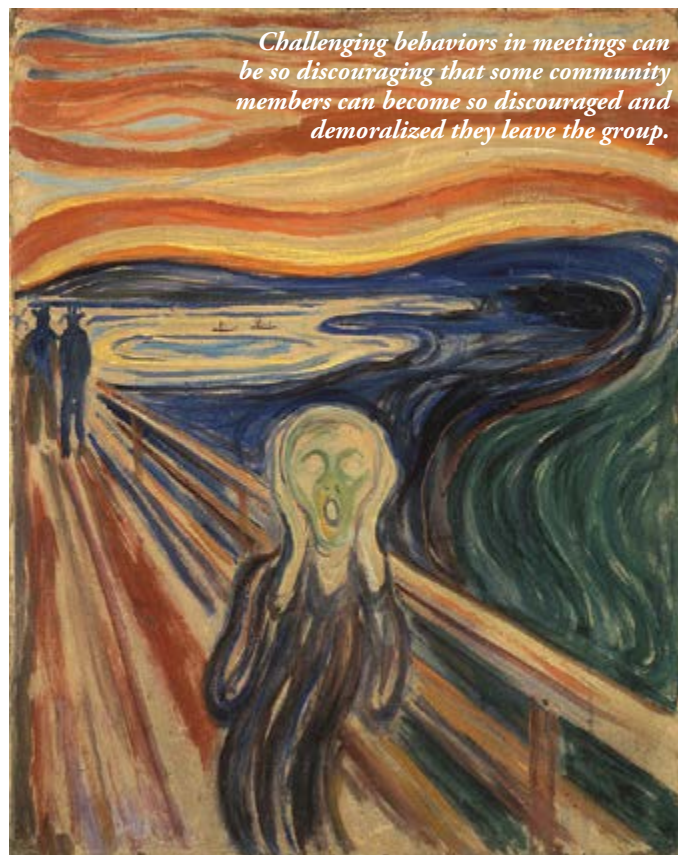
However, our founders had created an independent-income community, not an income-sharing one, and never intended to guarantee onsite employment. In our early days of carving out roads and building small homes in the mountains, our limited paid work was mostly about building roads and constructing buildings. One of Olive's supporters, who better understood our community's economic process, apologized the next day for asking us to harm ourselves with a work stoppage; her other

supporter realized this a bit later and also apologized. Dealing with Olive's “Threats and Demands” document, as it came to be called, required a series of frustrating, go-nowhere community meetings, including an exhausting day-long marathon, with no resolution. Finally, at a meeting of that year's community president and his team, Olive tore up the document and threw it in the air, stopping her strike campaign. And while her friends had apologized, she never did.

It's natural to expect fellow community members to want to engage in productive dialog in areas of disagreement, but we learned it didn't seem possible to have productive conversations with Olive. She behaved as if she couldn't tolerate the idea she might be mistaken about something, as if being “right” were a life or death issue, and people's disagreeing with her meant psychic obliteration, annihilation.

After the many tense, contentious whole-community meetings with Olive about these issues, the couple still milked their cow and saved on their food bill. The neighborhood drilled its shallow well and our community met state water requirements. We didn't go on strike against ourselves and women as well as men continued to facilitate meetings and take minutes as volunteers. But over the years Olive's attitudes, behaviors, and demands like these exhausted and demoralized us, costing our group meeting time, energy, and community morale.

The first four articles in the series focused on six ways individual members can protect themselves from these behaviors: (1) Learning all we can about these behaviors from books and videos; (2) *Lowering our expectations* that people with these behaviors will someday finally become cooperative, caring, or



The Scream, Edvard Munch, 1893. Munch Museum, Oslo, Norway.

While it's usually difficult for fed-up community members to ask the group to set limits and boundaries on meeting behaviors, it can be done, as happened in my community.



empathetic; (3) Setting limits and boundaries about unacceptable behaviors directed toward us; (4) Making in-person and email interactions public whenever possible; (5) Using the Inner Ninja technique; and (6) Getting outside healing help for *ourselves*. In the fifth article (issue #198), we saw how small groups of friends can help each other and the community by creating mutual support groups or creating alliances and/or petitions to request changes.

But what can whole communities do? What could Griswald's community do about his vengeance, or Hugo's or Umberto's communities do when they turned potential new members against their communities? What could our community do about Olive?

We Can Ask our Community to Set Limits and Boundaries

The last article described how a small group's informal alliance and almost-petition persuaded our community president that year and her advisors to finally remove Cornelius, a problematic member, from their team. Some years later some of the same people sent a petition about Olive, signed by six community members, to that year's president and advisory team.

"We believe Olive's behaviors in our business meetings frequently have a painful and disruptive, unmanageable quality," the petition read in part. "As if she were drunk or possessed by some dark aspect of her personality, our attempts to understand her underlying motivations or find a reasonable resolution go nowhere. ... When such behavior becomes chronic it undermines our ability to continue our meeting without entering a downward spiral in which arguments and processing can yield neither mutual understanding nor any level of resolution. There seems to be no other recourse but to insist that Olive's behavior be kept out of our meetings and, hopefully, dealt with in a more appropriate and useful venue. ... We ask you to inform Olive by letter that she must not bring these behaviors to our meetings anymore...(and) empower facilitators to remove her from meetings when her behavior gets out of hand."

While the president and her team considered this petition, they took no action. The request was too extreme, they said, and represented the views of too few people. And out of compassion for Olive, they didn't want her to feel targeted. (In the next article we'll look at the "Rescuer" role and the harm it can do as described in the Karpman Drama Triangle.)

If at First You Don't Succeed...

A few months later a group of about 10 members, including some of the same people, showed up at a meeting of the president and her team. They were there, they said, to protest Olive's latest disruption of a business meeting. Because she'd dis-

liked a long agriculture proposal and felt disgusted that the proposal folder had a plastic cover, she'd angrily ripped off the cover and threw it in the air, berating the agriculture committee because their proposal itself and its plastic cover would harm and defile the Earth. This was the last straw for many in our community, so this informal alliance arrived at the advisory team meeting *en masse* to formally ask them to *please do something!*

The president and her team finally overcame their reluctance. After deliberating on this request they decided to send Olive a letter, and shared the letter with the community:

"Your behavior in this process, especially in our business meetings, has become, in our opinion, a threat to both the process, and the well-being and development of our community," it began. "Our specific concerns with your behavior are:

1. Lack of trust in our process, in our committees, and in other members
2. Long-standing interpersonal conflicts between you and other members
3. Unwillingness to cooperate, collaborate or compromise
4. An energy of stopping proposals rather than helping develop alternatives
5. Frequent expressions of anger in meetings, energetically, verbally, and in body language
6. Attempting to enforce rigid idealism on the rest of the community

"We are therefore asking that you not attend our business meetings or participate in any other way in our decision-making process for at least a year or until you are able to resolve these issues. During this time, we suggest that you keep up with our community conversation, reflect on how your behavior affects the process, and if you wish, offer creative solutions to our problems. Of course, we are concerned not just for the community as a whole but also for you as an individual, and we do want to offer our support and assistance, and to work with you during this period. We hope that you can see this as an opportunity to give energy and attention to yourself and your own life, and to mend your relationships in the community."

In our community this was an aston-

ishing, unprecedented step! To the best of my knowledge it was the first time we had ever officially—and publicly—addressed a community member about their harmful behaviors and instituted real consequences. *Basically this was the community itself setting limits and boundaries.* It carried the implication, “And if you keep doing these things we can always set these limits again.”

Did This Change Anything?

Yes, and No. As noted in past articles, people with these kinds of behaviors—including unearned entitlement—usually find it unbearable to be constrained by limits and boundaries, and typically respond with incredulity and outrage. How dare you do this to me? To *me!* And people with these behaviors often cannot see that it’s their *behaviors* that elicit the limits and boundaries, not their opinions.

Olive did stop attending business meetings. But she sent the community an email shimmering with outrage, and threatened to make a documentary, “*Silenced!*” to expose how we silence members who speak the Truth on behalf of the Earth. Unable to tolerate the limits and boundaries we (publicly) placed on her, she moved out of the community altogether and stayed away for two years. When she returned and began attending business meetings again she behaved relatively peacefully, for a few weeks anyway. So as to whether our community’s action helped the situation: Yes, because we got slightly more than two years of peaceful business meetings without Olive’s challenging behaviors.

And also No, because after a few weeks back in residence she resumed her usual meeting behaviors. She had not mended her relationships with the many members with whom she had longstanding conflicts. At that time in our history our members were managing our community more effectively than in past years when members like Cornelius got away with not paying our annual dues and fees and violating other agreements (described in the last article). But we still didn’t understand management well enough to require Olive to comply with *all* the requests in the letter before she could participate in meetings again.

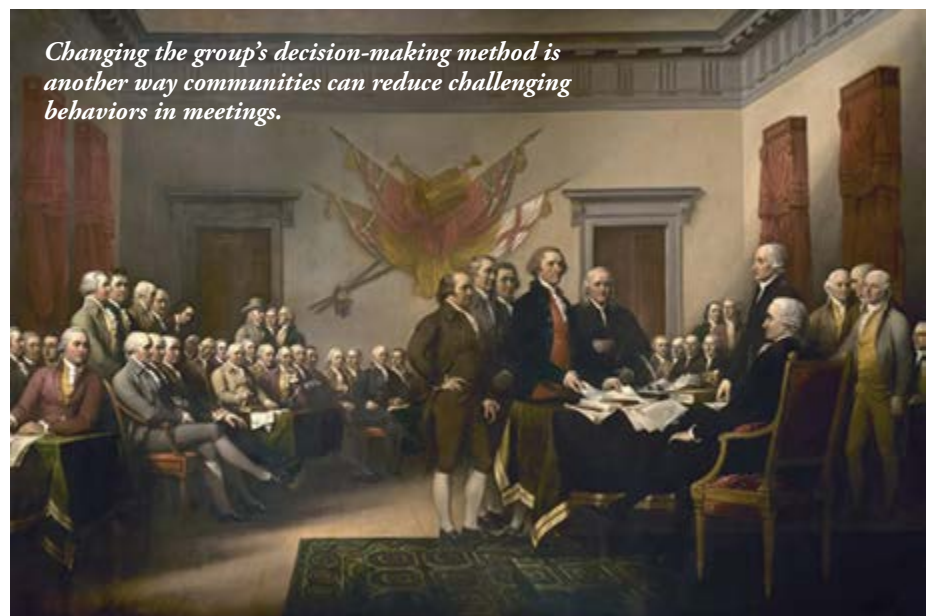
Our Community Takes Action—Changing to Modified Consensus

Let’s say your community uses classic, traditional consensus, in which anyone can block a proposal “for the good of the community.” So your community just drops the issue and stops trying to solve the problem. Convinced that the people who blocked the proposal would block any further attempts to solve the problem with future proposals, the group just gives up. This of course results in the inevitable resentment, discouragement, and community demoralization.

One way communities can reduce instances of people with especially challenging behaviors blocking proposals everyone else wants is to shift from classic, traditional consensus to a modified form, such as the N St. Consensus Method, for example. My community switched to a modified version of the N St. Method, partly because Olive and her two supporters blocked or threatened to block proposals most of us wanted, bringing several attempts to create small onsite agricultural enterprises to a standstill. Of course Olive and her followers threatened to block our first proposal to shift to this newly proposed consensus method in meeting after meeting. Our Governance Committee (which I was a part of) kept bringing the proposal back to the next meeting and advocating it again. Finally, after a year of this impasse, Olive and her friends, discouraged because the rest of us advocated the proposal so persistently, allowed us to pass it, but only if we modified it so much it barely resembled the original version we’d proposed. The weakened version that finally did pass, with Olive and her followers standing aside, was far less able to reduce frequent, frivolous, or personal-preference blocking than the original version. Still, it was a start.

A year later our Governance Committee introduced a second proposal to change our consensus method further toward our original idea. Olive and her followers threatened to block this proposal too, until, again discouraged because the rest of the community was so motivated and determined, they allowed it pass by only standing aside from it. We were *only* able to approve our second proposal for a modified consensus *because* we’d passed the first proposal about this the year before. Because our first proposal “opened the door,” you could say, our second proposal for a further modified form of consensus was able to barely squeak by.

A few months later one our founders who lived offsite returned to our meetings and threatened to block our slate of proposals to change our financial and legal system. We hoped to change this to prevent the potential legal and financial risks we’d inadvertently created in our early days. (See “Your Community and the Law,” issue #182.) The founder who returned to our meetings posed *such* a threat to our being able to approve the proposals to shift to our new financial/legal method, that we proposed a



Changing the group’s decision-making method is another way communities can reduce challenging behaviors in meetings.

Declaration of Independence, John Trumbull, 1817. Yale University Art Gallery

Replacing classic consensus to a modified form of consensus, as my community did, can result in significantly greater cooperation and good will in meetings.



Immediately after we instituted our modified consensus method Olive and her followers became more cooperative and congenial in meetings.

third modified consensus proposal that was even more like the N St. Method. Everyone but that founder was on board for this latest proposal, *including* Olive and her friends. We passed our third proposal easily. It had taken our community a full three years, and a serious financial/legal threat, for us to move from the form of consensus where we all had the power to stop any proposal anytime, to a method biased toward *approving* rather than stopping proposals, so we could finally approve our legal and financial proposals.

In the N St. Consensus Method, and my community's modified version, blocks don't stop proposals but only slow them down. The people who blocked a proposal and its advocates are tasked to organize a series of solution-oriented meetings to create a new proposal to address the same issues as the blocked proposal. If they cannot agree and can't create a new proposal, the first proposal comes back to the business meeting for a supermajority vote. The N St. Method has a 65 percent supermajority vote: if at least 65 percent of the full members in the business meeting vote Yes on the returned proposal, it passes. This means that most proposals, or an acceptable modified version created by those who blocked the first proposal, will pass. The percentage needed to pass a returned original proposal in our community is only 61.7 percent—the lowest I've ever heard of in a community using a modified method! I believe we passed such an extreme supermajority fallback vote because we were fed up with Olive and her supporters' blocks and threats to block over the years, and now made worse by our founder's recent threats to block our financial/legal proposals.

Immediately after we instituted our new modified consensus method, Olive and her followers (and everyone else) stopped blocking or threatening to block proposals and became more cooperative and congenial in meetings. Astonishingly, Olive's anguished, disruptive behaviors in meetings were suddenly far milder—she now behaved relatively well. Was it our new method? Because now none of us could stop proposals? Because we all now *had* to cooperate in considering proposals? Shifting to a modified form of consensus can make all the difference in how a group's especially challenging members treat other members and treat the community—not necessarily in social interactions around the community, but at least in meetings!

In 2011 I introduced the N St. Consensus Method to a large German income-sharing community that had been plagued by problems in meetings for years. After they implemented the N St. Method, one of my German friends said using the new method seemed to greatly reduce conflict in meetings. They were now discussing issues more courteously, he said, and passing proposals more easily.

Another Community Takes Action—The "Two Minute Rule"

While our community's attempt to change Olive's behavior in meetings worked only partially, communities with better skills and experience in community management, and better able to follow through with the limits and boundaries they set, can be more successful in changing these behaviors.

Hugo, described in the fifth article, would disrupt the meetings of committees he wasn't a member of. He'd basically show up as a visitor and hijack the meeting, derail its agenda, and overwhelm its members. Finally his community had had enough. They required all non-committee visitors to limit their comments to two minutes at the start of the meeting and remain silent after that, unless specifically asked a question or asked to comment. When Hugo showed up to the committee meetings again, the facilitator and *four other committee members* (I'm not kidding!) pulled out their cell phones and set

their timers to two minutes—a dramatic but effective non-verbal message.

Of course Hugo was outraged. Curbed by the community’s new agreement, Hugo would sit there, silent and fuming, which, although disruptive in itself, at least allowed the committee to go through its agenda without interruption. “Our Community Life committee is doing better now than in all the years since we started,” its chairperson told me.

Still Another Community Takes Action—Member Surveys, Rules about Committee Visitors

Another community with especially challenging members who also took over committee meetings approved a proposal that people could no longer sit in on committee meetings they were not a part of unless they first got permission from the committee. And to make sure community members’ voices were heard about issues a committee was considering that could affect everyone (rather than small internal community matters), from then on committees would create member surveys to seek opinions and use the survey results to guide their decisions. People with these behaviors could express their strong opinions in the surveys, and only attend meetings if they got permission first. “Our committees are working so much better now,” one community member told me.

Your community *can* set limits and boundaries on people who disrupt meetings with these kinds of challenging behaviors. You can require them to stop attending meetings for specific periods (if possible, given your community’s legal entity). This can include asking them to heal their relationships with other members, and/or get therapy or some other form of outside healing help. Your community can change from classic, traditional consensus to a modified version.

Especially Challenging Attitudes and Behaviors

More Obvious, Overt, Extroverted Narcissistic Behaviors:

(Grandiosity on the outside, insecurity on the inside)

- Delusions of superiority; self-centeredness
- Entitlement
- Impaired empathy
- Lying; exaggerating accomplishments
- Rapidly escalating anger; sudden angry outbursts
- Grandiosity
- Craving attention
- Criticizing others
- Mocking or jeering at others
- Invalidating, demeaning, or belittling others
- Bullying others

Less Obvious, Covert, Introverted Narcissistic Behaviors:

(Insecurity on the outside, grandiosity on the inside)

- Delusions of superiority; self-centeredness
- Relishing vengeance
- Manipulating others; using people
- Hypersensitivity to criticism
- Projecting their behaviors and attitudes onto others
- “Gaslighting” others (telling someone what they directly observed didn’t actually happen)
- Envy others; resenting others
- Limited self-awareness
- “Grooming” newer or less confident members to be their allies and support their version of reality

–DLC

Your community can create its own version of a two-minute rule for committee visitors, or seek community input for a committee’s proposals with member surveys, or require people who aren’t members of a committee to get permission first before visiting committee meetings.

Coming Up

In future issues we’ll look at how communities can also change from classic, traditional consensus to Sociocracy, a self-governance and decision-making method which can curtail especially challenging behaviors in committees and in whole-group meetings. We’ll also examine ways communities can curb these behaviors *outside* of meetings. We’ll consider Dr. Craig Malkin’s Connection Contracts, and how whole communities can use these contracts with members; and how communities can use the “Graduated Series of Consequences” and “Many Raindrops Make a Flood” methods to induce people to tone down their challenging behaviors. Lastly we’ll examine what can *stop* a community from setting limits and boundaries on people who do these behaviors when some community members take on the “Rescuer” role described in the Karpman Drama Triangle. 🌸

Diana Leaf Christian, author of Creating a Life Together and Finding Community, speaks at conferences, offers consultations, and leads workshops and online trainings on creating successful new communities, and on Sociocracy, an especially effective self-governance and decision-making method. See www.DianaLeafChristian.org.

1. As noted in previous articles, Olive passed away several years ago.

2. It was easy to wonder why Olive joined our community if she didn’t share its basic values and intentions—especially about land use, onsite agriculture, and our internal economic structure. Yet we bore some responsibility for this situation, because in the early years our community was so naive and mismanaged that while our shared values and intentions were implied in our culture, and obvious to anyone who talked at length with existing members, we hadn’t yet learned to state our values and intentions *explicitly*, either on our website, in our agreements, or on community tours. Meanwhile, Olive believed that *her* views were spiritually and ecologically impeccable and all other views were wrong.

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—Shen Pauley, reader and author, Barre, Massachusetts

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- GENOA (Global Ecovillage Network Oceania & Asia): ecovillage.org/region/genoa
- NextGEN (Youth Network): nextgen-ecovillage.org

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