

Part 4

Conducting Boards

When leaders yield, there is no resistance, when leaders insist there is no yielding.

—Ulysses S. Grant

Part 4 includes a bonus chapter that teaches a fair and consistent approach to conducting boards. This part focuses on a contentious topic, the tie-breaking process.

As in any business endeavor, board members need to get beyond positional obligations to discuss the underlying interests. If professionals cannot get to win-win outcomes, often the best outcome is diminished, and at times the entire process may come to a halt. If a picture is worth a thousand words, allow me to paint a story.

You Just Can't Make This Up

In 2002, four of us were involved in an annual awards board that ended in a tie. I was perplexed because the scores were not close, based on my scoring—the ones taught in this book. Back then, annual awards took up both sides of a nomination package and comprised almost 80 lines of information.

Package A weighed in at nearly 95 points. Package B, purportedly tied, amassed only 35 points using the same scoring system taught in this book. Yes, 35 points meant package B was bad, really bad. Most of the lines, one after another, were fluff. And those lines that were not fluff were not good.

As the board discussed the merits of the tied packages, I noticed two of the board members were relating their thoughts from clean sheets of paper. No notes, no marks—just a score on the top of the page that boiled 80 lines of information down to one numerical value. It had been two weeks since the scores were turned in; so, these members must have good memories.

Looking back to my packages, every line was underlined and circled, and scores were placed in the margin suggesting strengths and weaknesses. One board member said he “really” liked package B and cited one of the accomplishments.

Glancing to the margin on my corresponding package, I recognized the merit of that line and assigned a zero. I also noticed that 25 other lines in package B were fluff. The board member read the statement that had impressed him, “Volunteered to attend professional military education school early.” I pointed out how this and so many other bullets were unsupported and lacking any factual information and tangible action. Further investigation revealed he did not actually go to school. He only volunteered.

Conversely, package A was loaded with management- and leadership-level contributions. It was easy to find the 1-1/2s and 2s in the margin and then match the underlined words that identified the strengths. This is probably a good time to point out the package-A nominee was not from my organization.

I scratched my head and pointed out that package A only had two lines of fluff compared to 25 lines in package B. The other board member replied, “Yeah, but I really, really like package B.”

I thought, “Oh, two ‘reallys!’”

Imagine package B littered in circles, a method to highlight weak or unsupported accomplishments. I realized the board member did not have a good memory, and he just did not know what he was doing. In any dispute process, positions must be supported by merit. Discussions cannot be based on how much you really, really like a certain package (or person).

Bottom line: package B was filled with fluff, and the other board member did not want to discuss—or was unable to discuss—underlying interests. Without telling you how the board ended, just know I had a few sleepless nights after that board. I never forgot how unfair and

unconstrained the process was and sought to provide a fair and consistent mechanism to prevent that from happening every again.

I thought the tiebreaker was going to be easy; unfortunately, our awards program did not have provisions for such disputes. We went back and forth advocating packages and never made headway.

What does it all mean? I stand by the benefits of a consistent approach, as it leads to a fair outcome—certainly a fairer process than the personal preference method.

***Author's Tip:** The best way to resolve disputes is to prevent them. Use line-by-line scoring with clear guidance and a consistent process.*

Ben Franklin prolifically stated, “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” Most organizations have basic guidance for boards. Experience shows it is a gram of prevention instead of an ounce. Guidance typically does not include pre-board training or setup. Even if it does, many board members are not adequately trained in the consistent process as described in this book.

I have taught Chief Jaren’s system to more than 600 Airmen, NCOs, and Senior NCOs over the last three years. In doing so several second- and third order effects have come from this instruction. One ancillary lesson is the enduring principle that when grading packages facts will beat emotion every time. How students feel about a bullet fails in the presence of other students using this system. Furthermore, by only providing limited facts, the same way performance reports and recognition packages are often submitted, students become frustrated. Their annoyance drives home the principle that what is on the 1206 is what is graded, nothing more, and nothing less.

—CMSgt Justin Deisch, USAF

The key principles in this book will provide the ounce of prevention. Referring to the previous chapters, the highlights of any board process should include:

1. Line-by-line scoring. Each accomplishment should be scored on its own merit. This also helps in the tie-breaking process.
2. Performance levels. The numbering system isn’t important. Consistent line-by-line scoring by all board members is needed to minimize bias.

3. Board training and setup. Whatever measures are used, ensure board members are aligned. Consider a few sample bullets to standardize the team before beginning the review.

So, what about tie-breakers? Because packages are so tightly competitive, ties are inevitably going to occur. Fortunately, through our experiences, the Group awards' instruction was rewritten to include the tenets of the 715th Air Mobility Squadron awards scoring system. We also added the dispute resolution process described later in this chapter. This process proved so effective, I've added the bonus chapter to ensure everyone has something to benchmark. Dispute resolution training materials can be found on <http://www.BrownBagLessons.com>.



Chapter 10

Tie-breaking & Dispute Resolution

When much dispute has past, we find our tenets just the same as last.

— Alexander Pope

Since the premise of this book teaches how to score awards, as a Capstone it's appropriate to include a process for dispute resolution. If the board is set up with clear guidance using line-by-line scoring, the dispute process has a clear path for success. Conversely, the absence of a consistent process takes a skilled board president to navigate the minefields of personality, opinion and interest. This chapter seeks to secure that credibility.

Award Board Outcomes

A fair and consistent tie-breaking and dispute resolution process is essential to any board process. Through countless awards boards I have identified three common outcomes: uncontested, tied, and scrambled.

Uncontested

An uncontested board occurs when the order of merit for one candidate produces a unanimous or indisputable first place winner, such as when the candidate receives all first-place votes or three first-place votes and one second-place vote. Both examples should be considered uncontested. In the event of an indisputable winner, the board should certify the outcome.

Tied

A tied board occurs when the order of merit for two or more candidates results in a tie for first place. One example is when two candidates receive two first-place votes, and both receive two second-place votes. In the event of a tie, the board should reconvene to implement tie-breaking proceedings.

Scrambled

A scrambled board (scattered scores) occurs when the order of merit does not produce an outright winner and board scores are wildly spread across packages. Example: four different nomination packages

receive a first-place vote from the four board members and no package stands out from the rest. A scrambled board often occurs when board members are inexperienced or when the nomination packages are extremely competitive. Consider if nomination packages with 40 lines resulted in the following scores: candidate A – 39.5 points, candidate B - 39 points, candidate C - 38.5 points, and candidate D – 38.5 points. After reviewing 40 lines of information, highly competitive packages with scores this closely grouped might as well be tied.

We need to recognize that board members will have different values, beliefs, experiences, education, and backgrounds. Career field perspectives can have an impact on the perception of an accomplishment and assignment of scores. As well, results from another board member may be very close, yet not exact, and the slightest difference can change the overall outcome. In a case like this there is no right and wrong. Let the procedures work, let the process be fair, and let your personal interests stay out of the way.

Different board members can apply a fair and consistent process and arrive at different conclusions. When this happens, both outcomes are fair. In the example above, the margin of error was too close to become entrenched in a specific outcome. There were 40 lines of information, and the scores for candidate A and candidate B were within 1/2 of a point. Essentially, both candidates are deserving of an award.

In the event of a scrambled board, the board should reconvene to implement tie-breaking proceedings. The tie-breaking procedures alone add merit to the outcome, especially when you must identify a winner amidst such tight competition.

End to Gridlock

Over the years I have participated in a variety of boards requiring tie-breaking and dispute resolution procedures. The clear majority of tie-breaking boards were composed of mature and seasoned board members and the process produced the most talented and deserving winners. Unfortunately, there were times when the discussion evolved into unexpected behavior and unnecessary tantrums. As I reflect, it is apparent the root of the problem generally centered on anyone of three issues; 1) lack of preparation, 2) lack of a fair and consistent review process, or 3) lack of integrity (parochialism). Sometimes people just want what they want and say or do whatever necessary to get their way.

As a board member on a Stripes for Exceptional Performers (STEP) packages review, the outcome was not as clear as I'd hoped for. I scored the packages using line-by-line scoring and my scores were basically identical to another board member who scored packages using the same method. We were both consistent with the ranking. The other two board members were the exact opposite of our number 1 and number 4 scores providing a tied outcome. At that moment, I wish we had a conflict resolution board to review the packages again. The board president, acting as the tie breaker, weighed in on the issue and selected a package recommended for the promotion.

—CMSgt Manuel Sarmiento, USAF, retired

I have been involved in boards where the board president implemented tie-breaking proceedings and covered the merits of each package point by point leading to the selection of a unanimous outcome, or at least an unanimously supported, winner. I have also been involved where the board members were blinded by anything except the specific outcome they sought. In the example above, with scores that tightly grouped, how could anyone become entrenched in a single outcome. I'll just say it, how dare you think you are so right!

When a board president makes the selection, the efforts of the board members and the entire board process is negated. This is never a good approach. To prevent this from happening, a best practice is to perform a line-by-line review using the tie-breaking and dispute resolution procedures presented in this chapter.

This approach has turned disputed outcomes into consensus. The process also turned inexperienced into competent and the contentious often became unanimous, or at least supported. Not once did a disputed board end with contestation. Simply forcing all board members to score every line, that alone highlights (and prevents) parochialism, and offers inexperienced board members a teachable moment.

The following case in point shows how a problem was turned into a strong solution by one leader.

As a Master Sergeant experienced in writing with line-by-line bullet techniques, I brought these tools from Edwards AFB to my new assignment at Sheppard AFB. After processing into the new organization, I discussed my experience with the squadron's assistant superintendent. So, when there was a discrepancy with

one of the annual award categories due to perceived favoritism, he asked me to participate in secondary review.

All packages were rescored with the enclosed guidelines and our order of merit added to the total. From there, a different winner was selected than the one originally chosen. If we had not used this fair and consistent approach to evaluate the packages, the organization may have missed out, as our nominee was chosen as the winner of the wing annual award.

After discovering the approach used to conduct the board, I was requested to further implement the tools. One of the important steps we did was to change the composition of the board to include junior NCO's, whereas it previously consisted of only flight chiefs. Each of the boards was led by a flight chief or other senior leader, but adding junior NCO's provided the opportunity to learn a fair and consistent approach.

The efforts paid off in the very first quarter as our unit won eight of ten of the group awards submitted. My commander exclaimed that his people never won that many awards in a quarter during his entire career. We also won 16 wing-level awards throughout the year and consistently clinched special awards such as Lance P. Sijan at the group level, winning over half of those at the Wing level. One member even received a MAJCOM-level award. In the end, these procedures really work like magic and the results that year were quite a boost for the organization.

—MSgt Casey T. Schoettmer, USAF, retired

At first glance, performing a line-by-line review of tied or scrambled packages may seem daunting. But with every line, every package, and every board, your people, unit and organization become that much closer to achieving consistent outcomes.

The steps presented in this chapter have produced countless undisputed boards. It doesn't matter how entrenched people are at the beginning, the approach simply will not allow them to continue. First let's deal with a hardcore issue that will come up time and time again.

Personal Experience Trap

Board members are charged to evaluate the individual's contributions documented in the recognition package against the scoring criteria. No more, no less.

From my experience, even well-intentioned board members often add information about a candidate (let's say candidate A) from their

personal experience. This may include personal details or as facts about their accomplishments such as results from a recent business trip (TDY) that were not documented on the nomination package. Members who use this position-based technique put themselves at a risk of being labeled a biased or parochial evaluator. Bottom line, including personal experience during a board places objectivity is at risk.

I realize this may seem unfortunate for candidate A, whom quite possibly should be the winner. Certainly, the added information is beneficial for the candidate being advocated, but what about the other candidates? Surely, they have important information that was inadvertently omitted. Who is advocating on their behalf. Impartiality ceases the moment a board member advocates for one of the nominees.

Author's Tip: *When board members advocate for a specific candidate, impartiality is gone. Certainly, the added information is beneficial to the candidate being advocated, but what about the other candidates? Who is advocating on their behalf.*

In the interest of full disclosure, I must admit some will adamantly argue my views. In my opinion, these are well intentioned individuals and believe that filling in missing gaps is the right thing to do.

Author's Tip: *Let the process work, let the process be fair, and keep personal interests out.*

As soon as a board member, or board president, advocates for a candidate, impartiality is gone, favoritism has taken root. Just consider it from the other angle.

Tie-breaking and Dispute Resolution Procedures

The best part of the tie-breaking and dispute resolution procedures is the responsibility to select the winner is entrusted with the board members. In the event of a tie or scrambled outcome, a methodical system is invaluable to facilitate a fair discussion.

Right after retirement, I visited the Group to pick up some paperwork and I caught an awards board scoring award packages. They had a tie in one of the categories and I was invited to break the tie. With the line-by-line scoring, it only took me a few minutes to break the tie and was able to explain right away why one package stood out more than the other.

—CMSgt Manuel Sarmiento, USAF, retired

Assumptions

Before continuing, let's identify some assumptions to ensure we are talking apples and apples:

- Board training and setup. Whatever measures are used, ensure board members are aligned. Consider a few sample bullets to standardize the team before beginning the review.
- Line-by-line scoring. Although the numbering system isn't as important as consistent line-by-line scoring, recommend every line on every package is scored from 0 to 2 points. Each accomplishment should be scored on its own merit.
- The Board. While you can have any number of participants on a board, recommend four board members and a fifth person serving as the board president. The outcome from four voting members establishes a strong rationale how to proceed.
- Order of Merit. The order of merit is the ranking of packages from one through however many candidates are being considered. Board members must establish and submit an order of merit. If there are four candidates, the order of merit will be #1, 2, 3, 4, and ties are not permitted.
- Board president scores each accomplishment on its own merit but does not reveal scores.
- Board president establish an order of merit but does not reveal the ranking of packages.

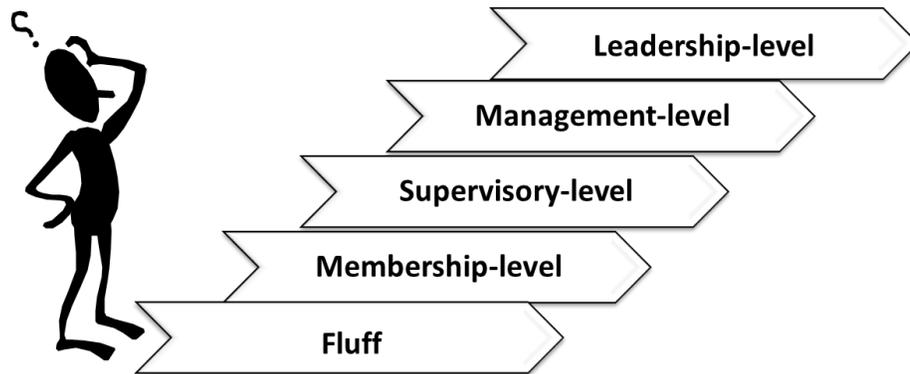
The outcome from four voting members establishes a strong rationale how to proceed. For example, when 3 members give one

candidate first place and the fourth board member gives first place to another candidate. In this case, 3-1 is very conclusive. Or, it sets up a chance for a 2-2 split which will initiate into the tie-breaking procedures for a deeper look. If the candidates are closely matched, consider they both deserve an award. The right people are being recognized. A deeper look only validates the final decision.

—Eric Jaren

Apply Performance Levels

As the board evaluates packages every line must be scored from 0 to 2 points. Every accomplishment must be scored on its own merit.



Scoring process

- Start by reading the bullet from left to right
- Identify components: action, impact, result
- Underline tangible components
- Circle ambiguous, weak or unclear components
- Consider a performance level that describes each component
- Select a performance level that describes the overall accomplishment
- Place a score from “0” to “2” points in the right margin that corresponds to the overall level of performance

For more examples on scoring, refer to Table 1. Performance-level scores on Page 54.

Let’s see how to tally scores and navigate through the three possible outcomes.

Uncontested Board

- Board members evaluate candidate packages
- Board members score every accomplishment on its own merit
- Board members score every line from 0 to 2 points
- Board members establish and submit a single order of merit
- Board president tallies the order of merit from board members
- Order of merit produces indisputable outcome

Table 2 depicts an indisputable winner. Candidate A received three first-place votes and one second-place vote. By combining the order of merit from all board members candidate A receives five (5) votes. Candidate B, the next closest score receives seven (7) votes. Candidate A is the clear winner.

Table 2.

	Board Member	Board Member	Board Member	Board Member	Total Score	Order of Merit
Candidate A	1st	1st	1st	2nd	5	1st place
Candidate B	2nd	2nd	2nd	1st	7	2nd place
Candidate C	3rd	3rd	3rd	4th	13	3rd place
Candidate D	4th	4th	4th	3rd	15	4th place

Establishing the order of merit is essential to any board process. This process normalizes the variety of scoring methodologies used by board members into a standard format. From there you tally up the order of merit to see who the board members recognized as the best candidate.

An incorrect method would be to count raw scores to determine the winner. Since people use vastly different scoring systems, imagine how one board member with a 1-100 scale can completely negate the scores of board members who use a 1-10 scale. If the individual placed any candidate ten points higher than the others it would likely become the winner or skew the results of the people who use a lower scale. A fair and consistent process begins with an order of merit.

—Eric Jaren

Tied Board

- Board members evaluate candidate packages
- Board members score every accomplishment on its own merit
- Board members score every line from 0 to 2 points
- Board members establish and submit a single order of merit
- Board president tallies the order of merit from board members
- Order of merit produces tied outcome
- Implement tie-breaking procedures

Table 3 illustrates a tied outcome. Candidate A and candidate B receive two first-place and two second-place votes. The outcome is tied since the combined order of merit is six (6) votes for each candidate. Board members should reconvene to review every package point by point.

Table 3.

	Board Member	Board Member	Board Member	Board Member	Total Score	Order of Merit
Candidate A	1st	1st	2nd	2nd	6	1st place
Candidate B	2nd	2nd	1st	1st	6	1st place
Candidate C	3rd	3rd	3rd	4th	13	3rd place
Candidate D	4th	4th	4th	3rd	15	4th place

Implementing tie-breaking procedures will provide more credibility to the outcome, especially when there is such tight competition. This process is not as daunting as it may seem.

Scrambled Board

- Board members evaluate candidate packages
- Board members score every accomplishment on its own merit
- Board members score every line from 0 to 2 points
- Board members establish and submit a single order of merit
- Order of merit produces scrambled outcome
- Implement tie-breaking procedures

Table 4 depicts a scrambled outcome. Candidate A and candidate C receive one first-place vote and nine (9) combined votes creating a tie for first place. However, candidate B and candidate D also received first place votes.

Table 4.

	Board Member	Board Member	Board Member	Board Member	Total Score	Order of Merit
Candidate A	1st	3rd	2nd	3rd	9	1st place
Candidate B	2nd	4th	1st	4th	11	4th place
Candidate C	3rd	1st	3rd	2nd	9	1st place
Candidate D	4th	2nd	4th	1st	11	4th place

While candidate B and candidate D did not tie for first, the scrambled outcome warrants further investigation. Taking the extra steps to review every package point by point will confirm if the board members are inexperienced or if the candidates are just extremely competitive. Either way, the procedures qualify the decision.

Dispute Resolution Ground Rules

To begin the dispute process there are a few ground rules. First, only the tied or scrambled packages should be included in the process. Before convening, the entire board must score every line from 0 to 2 points and submit their order of merit. Important note: The president must not reveal either scores or order of merit at this time.

Dispute Resolution Procedures

1. President leads line-by-line discussion
2. Lines with scores outside 1/2 point discuss differences
3. President introduces his/her line score
4. Members recount and submit an updated order of merit
5. President determines if procedures broke the tie
6. President introduces his/her order of merit

1. President leads line-by-line discussion

The board president initiates dispute resolution procedures. Starting on line 1 of Package A the board president asks each board member to state their score for that line. If scores are within 1/2 point of each other proceed to the next line. (Example: 1/2 point, 1/2 point, 1/2 point, 1 point).

2. Members with scores outside 1/2 point discuss differences

When scores are outside 1/2 point, the line must be discussed (Example: 1/2 point, 1/2 point, 1/2 point, 1-1/2 points). This example could be resolved several ways. The three board members who scored 1/2 point could increase the value of scores to 1 point. Or the board member who scored 1-1/2 points could decrease score to 1 point. Either action would put scores within 1/2 point.

Typically, when three board members have established a shared view they likely will not change. Unless a compelling reason is provided, the outlier will typically be the one to adjust. However, board members are not required to change scores during this part of the process.

Author's Tip: *When the board establishes a shared view, the outlier will usually adjust their score more in line with the other members. However, board members are not required to change scores during this part of the process.*

3. President introduces his/her line score

The goal is for board members to discuss merits to reconcile scores within 1/2 point. However, they are not required to change scores. When a disputed line cannot be reconciled, the board president will introduce his/her score for that line, thus ending the dispute for that line. Each board member involved in the dispute will change their score (for that line) to the board president's score.

***Author's Tip:** The board president will introduce his/her score when the board cannot reconcile scores within 1/2 point. This changes the score for one line and, in effect, encourages the board to become less entrenched. This process has worked every time.*

4. Members recount and submit an updated order of merit

The President continues the line-by-line review for every line on every package involved. After all packages have been reconciled, board members will re-tally scores and submit an updated order of merit.

5. President determines if dispute resolution procedures broke the tie

The Board president will then re-tally the combined order of merit to determine if the tie was broken. Changing 1/2 point here and 1/2 point there during the line-by-line review may impact the overall order of merit thus ending the tie, establish an undisputed, or supported, winner. If the tie is not broken there is only one remaining step to be taken.

***Author's Tip:** You must use the line-by-line scoring on all affected packages to ensure a fair and consistent evaluation. If the line-by-line technique impacted scores for one package it might change the outcome of the board. A fair and consistent evaluation applied to the other package(s) could very change the outcome several times during the process.*

6. President introduces his/her order of merit

If necessary, the last step of the process is to have the board president introduce his/her order of merit to the overall order of merit. This step will result in a winner.

Retrospect

The tie-breaking and dispute resolution process provides a fair and consistent method to resolve ties and scrambled outcomes. This process offers three levels of reconciliation to resolve the outcome.

- First, following an initial review of packages, board members submit their order of merit to select a winner.
- Second, if the initial review resulted in a tie or scrambled outcome, board members reconvene and discuss the merits of involved packages to reconcile scores line-by-line.
- Third, if the tie has not been resolved following the first two steps, the only remaining course of action is to introduce the board president's order of merit.

The process shared in this chapter may seem cumbersome at first, but after you try it, I guarantee you will see the merit. This fair and consistent process has resolved 90 percent of disputes before getting to the third step. The few times wherein a dispute continued through all three steps of the board process, the board unanimously agreed both packages warranted the award. Ending the dispute by adding the board president order of merit ensured, only after trying every other option, a fair and consistent process.

Post Board Actions

After the winner is selected there are a few steps that can be accomplished to prepare the winning package for the next level.

- Board president reviews the package with board members
- Board members discuss differences in scores
- Board president elicit from board member(s) what parts of the narrative need improvement
- Board member document and provide feedback so organization can improve the package for competition at the next level
- Organization updates recognition package accordingly

Conclusion

Whether you are an accomplished writer or a novice, you will see the merit in the approach. This book does not teach how to write a bullet. It teaches how to write a powerful bullet. It unlocks a secret that has benefited thousands. Now, I trust that it will benefit you.

Throughout a long career, you tend to learn a trick or two. At times, a mentor or supervisor shares tricks of the trade. Regrettably, we often learn from the school of hard knocks. Fortunately, every once in a while, a bit of luck comes your way. The magic contained herein teaches a critical eye, and the result is the composition of a powerful bullet.