



Dr. Conflict

by Mark Light

DEAR DR. CONFLICT, I am a new leader in a mostly volunteer-based nonprofit corporation. I inherited a board that is accustomed to micromanaging from a distance. Board members spend two to three hours a week at the organization, while those who do the bulk of the work spend many more. There are only six paid employees and nearly 100 volunteers. The board is elected by the body, which is part of the constitution. The organization has been in decline for more than a decade, and the board has blamed the previous three leaders for its problems—and now it has begun to blame me. Even though I'm the leader, I lead with a straightjacket because of this micromanagement style of leadership that has become the culture of the group.

How can I change the culture without causing a civil war? How do I create a climate in which volunteers willingly risk creativity when in the past they have paid a price for failure? How do I force the establishment to accept the fact that its leadership style is the problem? The previous three leaders quit and have had great success in their new roles, but I would like to enact change before moving on. What do you suggest?

Searching for an answer

Dear Searching,
Micromanagement has roots in power. Although your position as the executive

director conveys legitimate power, newness in the job blunts your ability to get things done. You must instead use personal power that is built on the trust people invest in you willingly. And the key ingredient for building your base of support is communication—lots and lots of it.

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Like the new sheriff in town without a trusty six-shooter, the only way to get the townsfolk to respect you is to jaw with them. And that's where you should start. Begin by addressing your micromanaging board members. Get to know them in person, break bread with each of them, and establish a relationship. Ask about their hopes for the future and what they'd like to see happen. Ask them about the problems within the organization and its decline and what they think should be done.

At the same time, talk with them about starting a more formal process for thinking about the future, including looking at the role of the board and the standards of conduct that should govern board members' behavior. The process should include a solid examination of

the position of the organization in the context of the past decade. Often planning processes overlook this because the lure of new programs is so much more interesting, but don't be seduced.

Dr. Conflict recalls an executive like you who rode into town with a mandate of change. The first thing he did was talk to everyone with a stake in the future of the agency. He discovered that it was better for all stakeholders to meet him in person than to hear about him through the grapevine. And instead of waiting for the chair of the board to call him, the newbie executive director visited with the chair almost every day for the first year and shared all the news, good and bad. The director became a seasoned veteran who turned the agency around and stayed a healthy 15 years. You do the same.

DR. CONFLICT is the nom de plume of Mark Light. In addition to his work with First Light Group (www.firstlightgroup.com), he teaches at Case Western Reserve University and Antioch University McGregor. Along with his stimulating home life, he gets regular doses of conflict with the Dayton Mediation Center.

What conflicts are vexing you? Send your questions to Dr. Conflict at conflict@npqmag.org. The doctor will respond discreetly, and your questions will help others who face similar situations. Reprints of this article may be ordered from <http://store.nonprofitquarterly.org>, using code 150308.