



Dr. Conflict

by Mark Light

DEAR DR. CONFLICT, I work at a nonprofit organization and previously served as a board member, but now only as a parent. Serving an educational function, this organization has massive debt and the true decision makers are a small group of members who make up an executive committee. The executive director has a vote on the executive committee. This group has power to overrule full board decisions and has done so many times. Treasurers, bookkeepers, and several board members have resigned because of this decision-making structure.

I am one of the board members who resigned because it was impossible to work with the executive director. In all matters—in every committee, at every fundraiser, at every event—this director must have final word. He has even overturned committee decisions. He has never received a job review, and even though the board passed a motion to review this person, it was overturned in an executive committee meeting just afterward. Many motions that were passed have been ignored, and many others were tabled month after month, such as one calling for an internal audit, which was needed because a six-digit loan was taken out without board member approval.

We'd like to get another opinion.

These parents are ready to bolt, and for good reason. But we don't want to be portrayed as ill willed. These parents truly care about the organization and the people it educates and strive for an organization that is fiscally responsible and working for the benefit of the people in it. What can we safely and legitimately do?

No names, please; we live here.

Dear No Names,

Dr. Conflict has just one question: How do you really feel about the executive director?

Although the root causes of the situation may be many, including a reprehensible lack of accountability flowing from the dreaded founder syndrome, Dr. Conflict can see that at the core of the situation you describe is a balkanized executive committee.

Dr. Conflict may get into big trouble for saying this, but executive committees in general are a pestilence; nothing has done more damage than this ubiquitous wolf in sheep's clothing. On the surface, executive committees seem like a great idea. What could be better than a committee to take a load off the board, handle business during in-between meetings, and maybe do the annual review of the executive director? And what incompetent executive director wouldn't want

the protection of an executive committee from the rest of the board?

By their nature, executive committees create an inner-outer, upstairs-downstairs dynamic within a board. If you're on the committee, you're part of the in group where the action happens and where important work gets done; there's red meat on the table. If you're not on the committee, prepare to starve for substance; you're destined for rubber-stamping. You're in the out group, pal. Tough luck, no need to come to board meetings, no need to participate, just send in the check. And if you need to know what happens, read the daily paper. Even worse, while the executive committee is busy building strong bodies eight ways with a Wonder Bread diet of give-and-take decision making, the rest of the board becomes malnourished with mind-numbing junk-food show-and-tell reports.

Some will say that their board's too big to do business without an executive committee. But unless you're talking about 20-plus members, that's simply not true. Others will say they love their executive committee. That's great for you lucky anomalies, but Dr. Conflict thinks the risks of damage are too high.

So here's a novel idea: get rid of the executive committee and take all that important work to the full board.

Attendance will improve, better decisions will be made, and transparency will be, well, more transparent. And while you're at it, get rid of all the other time wasters and use ad hoc committees instead. If you have to retain the executive committee, restrict its diet to the little stuff; never empower an executive committee to make major decisions for the full board, such as firing the executive director or taking on major debt. That's what transparency means: everyone who needs to know information knows it. And that means the full board, not just the in-group few.

You may say that your problem isn't so much about the executive committee that enables the executive director's behavior or bows down to him in fear or reverence but with the executive director himself. From your perspective, the executive director is way out of line. Taking on major debt without the full board's knowledge? Countermanding the will of the board in general and for a financial review in particular? Are these board members just a disastrous combination of stupid and lazy? Is the executive committee related to the guy or doing business with him? What other reasons could there be for this group to act so irresponsibly?

Of course, your executive director's side of the story may be quite different. He may think that you're one of those micromanaging board members who is never satisfied, always delving into areas that are none of the board's business, not respecting the chain of command. "Good riddance," he may have said when you threw in the towel. But throw in the towel you did, and when you resigned from the board, you took yourself out of the equation. You now have to decide whether this conflict is worth pursuing.

Though it's obvious that you care about the program, you have surely

incurred hefty emotional costs that include lying awake at night worrying, fuming, and nurturing the conflict. That's why the first question is whether it's worth it to continue paying the freight of carrying the conflict forward. When you resigned, you said, "I'm done with this." So one alternative to consider is just that: it's over, move on.

Another path is to stick with it and carry on the fight. Consult legal counsel, talk to press, picket the agency, contact the state's attorney general, phone your mayor or senator. Ramp it up. It's time-intensive to go this route, and you will be subject to sour-grapes dismissals. But many a cause has been worth the fight; if folks like you didn't get angry about injustice, there wouldn't be a non-profit sector.

A different way to work out your anger is to launch your own agency and put this derelict agency out of business. That's right, instead of complaining about how bad it is, put the gloves on and duke it out in the marketplace. Don't like the way that agency runs? Think you can do a better job? Go ahead, make your day. Take all that energy, assemble those who resigned and everyone else you can find, and hang up a shingle. Put that outfit out of business with a better value proposition. That's not sour grapes; that's the American way!

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

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