



Dr. Conflict

by Mark Light

DEAR DR. CONFLICT, Recently, I became the executive director of a small, long-standing organization. I expected to uncover dysfunction, but I had no idea how major the red flags would be. Every time a flag cropped up, I broached the issue with the board chair, who is also the former executive director (I know, I know! Red flag! Red flag!). In each case, I was told not to worry about it, as in, “Don’t worry about not having access to the organization’s books to assess the fiscal health” (flag). At our next meeting, I plan to present these issues to the full board and request guidance.

I know what I can and cannot support, and I am ready to step down. I want to give the board members every chance to do the right thing—perhaps they will decide independent of the board chair, who says they are great and do what he tells them to do. But every pore in my body is screaming, “This is not OK! Get out now!”

So my question is this: when it’s clear that the organization’s practices are not acceptable by reasonable industry standards, how long should the executive director fight the good fight?

Seeing Red Flags

Dear Seeing Red Flags, Dr. Conflict’s first rule of conflict is that it’s never about the fence. Neighbor-to-neighbor disputes often arise over something trivial when the real issue is something deeper. Your troubles may appear to be about the organization’s financials or discriminatory practices, but they are just the symptoms.

The sorry news is that you can’t get anything done because you’re not the “true” executive director. You can call yourself the general manager, but executive director? No way. And your board chair? You guessed it: he’s the true executive director, the big cheese, the head honcho.

Why is he acting like the boss? Could it be that he has founder’s syndrome and can’t let go? Could he have an undying thirst for power? Dr. Conflict’s best guess is that he’s acting like the executive director because you’re not. That’s right: you need to start acting like an executive director—and the sooner the better!

Here’s the question you need to answer: if you see flag after flag, why are you doing so little? This is no time to timidly ask for the board’s guidance. If you want the board to do the right thing, get its blessing to do it, or leave. Every great executive director knows the board wants you to lead, to help it be the best it

can be. And guess what? The best CEOs “are expected to accept the central leadership role in nonprofit organizations, [which] often requires that CEOs take responsibility for enabling their boards to carry out the boards’ duties,” according to Robert Herman and Dick Heimovics.

If things are as bad as you say, the state attorney general, the local press, or some wingnut will get wind of these problems. Do you want to take the fall for being executive director in name only, or do you want to take a stand? By standing up for the responsibilities of your office, you have a shot at landing the top job for real and making things right. But before you proceed, have a confidential conversation with an attorney.

DR. CONFLICT is the pen name of Mark Light. In addition to his work with First Light Group (www.firstlightgroup.com), Light teaches at the Mandel Center for Nonprofit Management at Case Western Reserve University. Along with his stimulating home life, he gets regular doses of conflict at the Dayton Media Center, where he is a mediator.

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