



Dr. Conflict

by Mark Light, MBA, PhD

What do you do when your boss is a tyrant? Doctor Conflict advises reaching out to Human Resources, documenting your leader's transgressions, and helping to create solidarity among your colleagues. Dusting off your resume—while tempting in the heat of the moment—should be your last resort.

DEAR DR. CONFLICT,
I am texting this sitting outside my office. Frankly, the idea of going in is more than I can bear.

The thing is, in my organization there isn't one specific conflict I am concerned about, but a kind of constant tension. My boss is very short-tempered, and people are so nervous around him that everyone walks on eggshells all the time. It's kind of like having a hyper-critical parent. You get hit (not literally, of course) when you least expect it.

It has made the office very quiet. No one speaks up in meetings, and we need to talk about things because I do not think the organization is doing well financially. I don't want to lose the job and I doubt anyone else does either, but it's as if we exist in a fog.

Carl (not his real name) became the executive about a year ago. He came from a financial services background and has never led an organization before. His nature is to be frugal. He

actually outfits the office with free pens from our local bank, and he makes people pay into a fund for the watercooler.

I know that what I am describing is not conflict per se but maybe an avoidance of conflict? What could I possibly do to try to help in the situation?

Existing in a Fog

Dear Existing in a Fog,

Your executive is tyrannical: intemperate and hypercritical. Your executive is new to the corner office: door closed, fog city. Your executive is frugal: free pens and watercooler surcharges. Your agency is not doing well financially.

And you? You are very unhappy: “the idea of going in is more than I can bear.” Although it does not salve the pain, you're not alone—20 percent of people have brutal bosses, and almost everyone (90 percent) has worked for one at some point or other.¹ Even though conventional wisdom is to get out now, you want to help. Dr. Conflict will try to lend a hand, but do dust off your resume just in case.

Explaining Carl's behavior is tricky; only he can know his motivations. But it is helpful to think about who he is so that you can make an informed decision.

Because of Carl's financial background, he's bound to be focused on the cost of things rather than their value, more certain about the world, and less adaptable. Given all we know, his personality type is most likely the “hard-nosed and silent” inspector² who is “driven by accountability, productivity, and the bottom line.”³

The problem with this approach, even in financial terms, is that it is likely to have an effect on staff productivity. Because he has not been a top manager before and has not experienced firsthand the terrible cost associated with having low staff morale, he may not see that as a financial issue—but, of course, it is. That said, a sense of urgency is a necessary first step in undertaking the changes needed to fix your financial problems, but Carl's approach is the opposite of “always focusing on the *heart* and not just the mind.”⁴ You don't do this by hunkering

down in your office lobbing incendiaries and creating a stifling panic.

If there's an upside, it's that this is his first shot in the top job and he doesn't want to blow it. This may give you hope (and leverage) for resolving the situation. Maybe, like most managers, he is more clueless about his behavior than he is deliberate.

With that said, the old joke about how many psychologists it takes to change a lightbulb applies (the answer is, only one, but the lightbulb has to want to change). It is very hard for people to change fundamentals, and Carl may be no exception. But if it's just polishing rough edges, maybe you won't have to leave your job.

Overall, there is cause for optimism. Robert Sutton's Asshole Rating Self-Exam assessment says this about Carl: "You are a borderline certified asshole; perhaps the time has come to start changing your behavior before it gets worse."⁵ Sutton's Boss Reality Assessment Survey System evaluation says this to his subordinates: "You could do better but could do a lot worse too."⁶ Personality types like Carl "may be slow to change, but once they see the practical value in making a course correction, they can be quick to implement it and often become zealots of the new way of thinking."⁷

Let's turn now to what you can do to help. First, reaching out to your agency's HR department is a must. Although bullying is still prevalent in the workplace, there is much less tolerance for it now. Second, you must document whenever Carl acts out. List the date, time, people involved, and circumstances, and give a thorough description.

Third, reach out to your co-workers. Beyond one-on-ones, create some rituals and ceremonies (birthdays, holidays) for you and your colleagues to enjoy. In addition to the comfort of group activities, you'll begin to band together as a group,

which can empower all of you to action later on if things don't improve.

Don't forget to invite Carl to some of these events. It's probable he avoids this sort of thing, but once he loosens up, he'll enjoy himself. Make it easy for him to attend, and be ingratiating. Once he gets to know you and your colleagues, he will be easier to work with. Who wouldn't love you once they get to know you, right?

Finally, reach out to Carl with your concerns. But before you do, know what you want. What behaviors do you want him to stop, start, and continue? Prioritize the choices and work on your script. Describe the offending behavior and how it affects you in nonjudgmental terms, using "I" statements. For example, "I can do a much better job when I know how the project fits into the bigger picture," or "I get very anxious and lose focus when I feel pressured."

Rehearse your script until you know it by heart, and then say to Carl, "I need your help to make my work better." Don't overwhelm him; pick your top choice for the first conversation and add one thing he does that is helpful. Keep it short and simple. If things improve, keep building the relationship and the feedback.

If the conversation fails or he doesn't improve, try again. It's important to do this, because when you take it to his boss, he or she will ask if you tried to resolve the issue directly. "Not once, but twice" should be your answer. And then present your journal of Carl's misbehavior.

Ken Blanchard said, "Feedback is the breakfast of champions."⁸ That may be, but it's a tough meal to eat; most of us don't know how to ask for it and don't want to hear it. That's why real feedback is priceless, especially when delivered carefully, sincerely, and with tact.

Maybe you'll be the one to help Carl, but keep that resume warm. And be ready to take your concerns to his boss, backed

up by your evidence, good will, sincere attempts to resolve things directly, and that coalition of co-workers empowering you.

NOTES

1. Harvey A. Hornstein, *Brutal Bosses and Their Prey: How to Identify and Overcome Abuse in the Workplace* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996).
2. David Keirsey, *Please Understand Me II: Temperament, Character, Intelligence* (Del Mar, CA: Prometheus Nemesis Book Co., 1998), 108.
3. Otto Kroeger, Janet M. Thuesen, and Hile Rutledge, *Type Talk at Work: How the 16 Personality Types Determine Your Success on the Job*, rev. ed. (New York: Dell, 2002), 306.
4. John P. Kotter, *A Sense of Urgency* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press, 2008), 60.
5. Robert Sutton, "Asshole Rating Self-Exam," *Are You a Certified Asshole?*, www.electricpulp.com/guykawasaki/arise/.
6. Sutton, "Boss Reality Assessment Survey System," *How Good Is Your Boss?: Or Is Your Leader a Certified Brashhole?*, www.goodbadboss.com.
7. Kroeger, Thuesen, and Rutledge, *Type Talk at Work*, 306.
8. Ken Blanchard, *BrainyQuote*, www.brainyquote.com/quotes/keywords/champions.html.

DR. CONFLICT is the pen name of Mark Light, MBA, PhD. In addition to his work with First Light Group (www.firstlightgroup.com), Light is executive in residence at DePaul University School of Public Service, where he teaches strategic management, human resource management, and ethical leadership. John Wiley & Sons published his most recent book—*Results Now*—in 2011.

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