



Dr. Conflict

by Mark Light, MBA, PhD

Dr. Conflict's prescription for getting fractious board members back in the swing of things? "Red meat on the table," a good facilitator, and a new, shared vision. But executive leadership is central: "Wake up," says Dr. C., "smell the coffee, and enable the great board that your agency and its clients require."

DEAR DR. CONFLICT,
My board has divided itself into factions, and there seems to be a war being waged in and outside of the boardroom. I do not even really know what the issue is except that a few people seem to have gotten on each others' last nerves. When certain people speak, certain other people (a) roll their eyes, (b) cut each other significant glances, or (c) shift around angrily in their chairs. This usually precedes a stated contradiction of whatever someone else has just said.

I think that all of this has actually crowded out any thoughtful governing, but how should I, as mere executive director, take this on? It is awkward because the behavior is very childish and I will feel like I am reprimanding them when they are actually supposed to be the parent figures.

Mere Executive

Dear Mere Executive,
Every few years someone just like you writes about this type of situation. The details vary somewhat, but the story always includes the same symptoms of eye-rolling, chair-shifting, last-nerve boards. Is it any wonder that "governance as leadership," in which effective boards operate in the fiduciary, strategic, and

generative modes,¹ is as likely to occur as babies sleeping through the night? ("You've heard about them, but it certainly didn't happen with your kids.")²

The good news—if you can call it that—is you're not alone. CEOs and board members in the BoardSource 2010 Nonprofit Governance Index "generally agree that board performance is not at the top of the class."³ The 978 CEOs who responded gave their boards a C+, which would put their boards on academic probation at many universities. At least that's an improvement over the 2007 Index, where respondents said, "Nonprofit board performance is mediocre at best."⁴

What the heck is going on here? Why is it that the very people interested enough in good governance to join BoardSource are giving their boards such middling grades? No surprise, it's largely about fundraising (or the lack thereof). But why are you, Mere Executive, having such a lousy time with your crew? Maybe it's because your board members were the babies that cried through the night.

More likely they are reverting to their primate heritage and simply stirring the pot of conflict as a way to deal with the boredom that plagues so many boards. After all, the same architects of the "governance as leadership" framework identified, a decade earlier, boring meetings as

one of the top four complaints of board members.⁵

Think that adaptation to boredom is farfetched? Not so for Thomas Zurbuchen, at the University of Michigan's Center for Entrepreneurship, who finds four phases of boredom: Phase one is distraction, which you can first see in the wandering, rolling eyes. Phase two is the loss of goal—the fog that descends and eradicates passion. Phase three is conflict that turns team members into enemies. Phase four is hopelessness.⁶ Sounds just like your board, doesn't it?

Let's assume for a minute that boredom is the reason for the flaring up of conflict on your board. But that certainly is not the root cause; it's a presenting symptom. What could be the cause of the boredom? Perhaps it's a failure to put "red meat on the table," which, out of the four standard complaints of board members, is number one. Or perhaps it's their third complaint, that board members must grapple with an overwhelming amount of information. Or maybe it's their fourth—that the "parts on this board sum to less than the whole."⁷

These are fairly straightforward—though not necessarily easy—problems to address. Dr. Conflict recommends that you begin with the first complaint and put red meat on the table—figuratively speaking, of course. This is the

generative mode of governance, with its “different definition of leadership. Leaders enable organizations to confront and move forward on complex, value-laden problems that defy a ‘right’ answer or ‘perfect’ solution.”⁸

What is the right cut of red meat to serve? Consider a longer session for the board, during which you directly confront the question of what is holding back the agency in general and the board in particular. Get a good facilitator who can manage the tensions in the room, and consider fronting the session with an interview study of the board members that allows them to speak candidly and anonymously.

The likelihood is that you’ll hear many complaints, including those mentioned earlier. It could be that there’s confusion around duties and guidelines of conduct, or that there are too many committees (or too few). Create ad hoc committees around the major problems you identify, draft action plans, and then go to implementation.

You could amp it up with a bigger-picture approach by changing the question from what is holding your agency back to what can take it forward. Some call this a wish session, where you simply ask, “What do you wish for our agency?” Shadow sides still come out, but in a more positive frame, while at the same time opportunities are voiced on the way to a shared vision. Remember Friedrich Nietzsche’s wisdom: “He who has a why to live can bear almost any how.”⁹ The “why to live” can bring even the most eye-rolling, last-nerve board members together.

But where, Dr. Conflict wonders, is the leadership? The above-mentioned tactics are all well and good, but who is to put them into place? Nowhere in your letter do you mention the board chair, and you call yourself a “mere executive director,” as if you have nothing to do with the unrest of your board. But you have everything to do with it. “To stand

aside and expect the board to be effective without the help of the executive director is utter folly. That’s why for the executive director who asks ‘What good is the board?’ comes the reply that he or she alone is largely responsible for the answer.”¹⁰ Indeed, board members not only want you to help them be more effective, they expect it. They want you to provide the leadership necessary to enable the board’s work.

Robert Herman and Dick Heimovics characterize this as executive centrality—wherein “chief executives can seldom expect boards to do their best unless chief executives, recognizing their centrality, accept the responsibility to develop, promote, and enable their boards’ effective functioning.”¹¹

Here comes the tough love: you get the board you want. If you’re going to see yourself as a “mere executive director” who has no responsibility for the board’s effectiveness, your dream has come true. But Dr. Conflict urges you to step up to the real world where “board members and staff expect executive directors to take responsibility for success and failure and they do take such responsibility.”¹² Wake up, smell the coffee, and enable the great board that your agency and its clients deserve and require.

NOTES

1. Richard P. Chait, William P. Ryan, and Barbara E. Taylor, *Governance as Leadership: Reframing the Work of Nonprofit Boards* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2004).
2. Mark Light, *Results Now for Nonprofits: Purpose, Strategy, Operations, and Governance* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2011), xiv, 137, 287.
3. BoardSource, *Nonprofit Governance Index 2010* (Washington, DC: BoardSource, 2010), 6, www.boardsource.org/dl.asp?document_id=884.
4. BoardSource, *Nonprofit Governance*

Index 2007 (Washington, DC: BoardSource, 2007), 4, www.boardsource.org/dl.asp?document_id=553.

5. Chait, Thomas P. Holland, and Taylor, *Improving the Performance of Governing Boards* (Westport, CT: American Council on Education/Oryx Press, 1996), 1–2.

6. Thomas Zurbuchen, “Phases of Boredom,” *Associate Dean Zurbuchen’s Blog*, February 24, 2010, cfe.engin.umich.edu/blog/2010/02/phases-of-boredom/.

7. Chait, Holland, and Taylor, *Improving the Performance of Governing Boards*, 1–2.

8. Chait, Ryan, and Taylor, *Governance as Leadership*, 134.

9. www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/f/friedrich_nietzsche.html.

10. Light, *The Strategic Board: The Step-by-Step Guide to High-Impact Governance* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2001), xvii, 145, 145.

11. Robert D. Herman and Dick Heimovics, “Executive Leadership,” in *The Jossey-Bass Handbook of Nonprofit Leadership and Management*, 2nd ed., Robert D. Herman and Associates, ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 2005), 157.

12. Herman and Heimovics, *Executive Leadership in Nonprofit Organizations: New Strategies for Shaping Executive-Board Dynamics*, Jossey-Bass Nonprofit Sector Series, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1991), xiii.

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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