



## Dr. Conflict

by Mark Light, MBA, PhD

Consultants sometimes organize their approach to nonprofit boards around a set of strict norms and assumptions that are not exactly on point. Here, the good doctor's advice contains a gentle "Physician, heal thyself" nudge.

**D**EAR DR. CONFLICT:  
*I am a consultant who has been doing strategic planning with a nonprofit that is facing significant marketplace changes. The executive director is very knowledgeable on many levels. She has a great board president, who is a whiz at finance and is very supportive.*

*There are a couple of issues: (1) Most of the board members are retirees. This is not a problem; recent retirees make some of the best board directors! Yet, at least half of the members have been on the board for between ten and over twenty years. The board president has served as president for fifteen years.*

*One cannot question the passion these folks have for the commitment; however, I do feel some turnover is healthy, and I cannot persuade them of that fact. Far too many—in fact, the majority—are octogenarians. I am a big believer in the value of institutional history, but this is way too much. I have run into this before in cases where long-time board directors throw out term limits so they can keep on serving. They truly believe that what they are doing is in the best interest of the organization.*

*Of course, I made the recommendations for healthy turnover, diversity,*

*and so forth, but there is lip service and there is action, and clearly they don't want to take action. Ideas?!?*

*(2) The vice president is soon to be president, and he is not going to be good for the organization. He is a very aggressive person and shoves his ideas down everyone's throat. No one will stand up to him, and I understand why: it's exhausting!*

*If he becomes president, he will make the executive director's life miserable. He doesn't respect the ED, who is well respected in the field and has two master's degrees, including one in nonprofit management. No one on the board will admit to any discomfort or confront the problem. I advised the board to give the prospective president an out by having the current board president question if he has enough time to devote to all the changes ahead. Any other ideas??*

—Can't Get Through

Dear Can't Get Through,

You applaud these octogenarians for their commitment, and praise the value of recent retirees, but at the same time you want to get these lifers out the door.

Nationwide, the percentage of chairs and board members sixty-five and older is 27 and 16 percent, respectively;<sup>1</sup> if

the majority you're working with are really in their eighties, you may have a point, and your rationale that some turnover promotes diversity/brings in new blood makes sense. But that's still a lot of wisdom, wealth, and work to lose. That said, you could try to influence the board to go for term limits (71 percent of boards have them) by putting together a list of respected agencies in your community who have term limits, along with their rationale for doing so—maybe even have a few tell their stories to the board.

Now to your question about the aggressive incoming president. A solution is to have the next VP serve in a closer partnership with the new president to balance his style. But where is the ED in all this? This is a clue as to why there are so many difficulties. Robert Herman says, "Boards are much more likely to be active, effective bodies when they are supported by a chief executive."<sup>2</sup> Dr. Conflict guesses the ED is absent because she doesn't know how to take this role. The bottom line is, you can't get through, because you're not supposed to; that's the ED's job, armed with your support/counsel. Instead of a consultant, be a coach, and help the ED improve her leadership. She'll be better off, the board will be more effective, and you can take a much-needed vacation.

Dear Dr. Conflict,

*As a consultant on governance, I am working with a board of directors that on the surface seems to be functioning in a reasonably harmonious and professional manner. It was only after private interviews with most of the directors that I discovered a deep divide in the board between an “old guard” (many of whom are former football players with little interest in the substance of the board’s work, and whose main focus is the social side of board activities) and a “new guard” (a group of younger members who take their fiduciary responsibilities seriously and want the board to operate in a more professional manner). The leader of the “old guard” clique is a former board chair. He dislikes the current board chair and works actively to undermine him, even to the point of calling other directors before board meetings to encourage them not to support the existing chair. What action would Dr. Conflict advise a consultant to take under such circumstances?*

—What’s a Consultant to Do

Dear What’s a Consultant to Do,

On the surface, the board is harmonious and professional, but underneath the placid surface is a sharknado of old-guard board members advocating for their social interests against a new guard of younger, well-intentioned fiduciaries. Adding chum to the water is the former chair, who is undermining the current chair. Your own stance on the matter seems to be decidedly pro-new guard: fiduciary versus social interests, operate in a professional manner, etcetera.

So what to do? Start by examining your own appraisal that the board is “functioning in a reasonably harmonious and professional manner.” What indication do you have that this is true? I suggest starting with the core functions of the board: Lead the organization;

establish policy; secure essential resources; ensure effective resource use; lead and manage chief executive performance; engage with constituents; ensure and enable accountability; and ensure board effectiveness.<sup>3</sup> Then, evaluate whether or not the board members are doing their job “to exhibit the care, loyalty, and obedience on behalf of the organization [that requires] active and informed preparation and participation in the conduct of board business, including raising questions and issues that would reasonably be raised by any prudent person.”<sup>4</sup> This one has Dr. Conflict worried because of your description of the football players as having “little interest in the substance of the board’s work, and whose main focus is the social side of board activities.”

Assessing the performance of both the board and board members might begin with BoardSource’s excellent range of tools, followed by a consultant just like you to help the board understand its opportunities.<sup>5</sup> But however you do the assessment, do it you must.

Why? Consultants (like all human beings) often see what they expect to see based on their own biases. For example, how do you know that the former board chair is truly working actively to undermine the existing chair? Given that one of the duties of the board is to raise questions and issues, is doing so behind the scenes *verboten*? Does being an effective board member forbid one from having sidebar conversations with other members in the interest of the agency? Is lobbying other board members to support one’s motion hostile to good governance? If it were, the Civil Rights Act that just celebrated its fiftieth anniversary never would have become law.

If you truly believe the old guard is outmaneuvering the younger members and you have confirmed this theory, it could be time for you to take the role

of a coach and help the younger board members understand that politics are an unpleasant fact in all arenas, including nonprofits. Then, teach them how to make politics work for them to get what they truly want. They may be purists at heart and have disdain for the whole idea, but remind them that “the lack of power corrupts. If you don’t have power, you can’t stand up for what you believe is right.”<sup>6</sup>

## NOTES

1. BoardSource, *Leading with Intent: A National Index of Nonprofit Board Practices* (formerly known as the *BoardSource Nonprofit Governance Index*).

2. Robert Herman, “Executive leadership,” in David O. Renz, ed., *The Jossey-Bass Handbook of Nonprofit Leadership and Management* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 174.

3. David O. Renz, “Leadership, governance, and the work of the board,” in David O. Renz, ed., *The Jossey-Bass Handbook of Nonprofit Leadership and Management* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 125–56.

4. *Ibid.*, 134–35.

5. To access the tools offered by BoardSource, visit [www.boardsource.org](http://www.boardsource.org).

6. Linda A. Hill and Kent Lineback, “The Best Way to Play Office Politics,” *Harvard Business Review*, [hbr.org/video/2226595804001/the-best-way-to-play-office-politics](http://hbr.org/video/2226595804001/the-best-way-to-play-office-politics).

**DR. CONFLICT** is the pen name of Mark Light. He is founder and president of First Light Group ([www.firstlightgroup.com](http://www.firstlightgroup.com)), whose mission is to bring your future within reach through executive coaching, sustainable strategy, teaching and training, and writing. Light is also senior professional lecturer at DePaul University School of Public Service.

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