



Dr. Conflict

by Mark Light, MBA, PhD

If you find yourself frustrated with your board, ask yourself two questions: “What are the core duties of a board?” and “Am I doing my best to help my board carry them out?”

DEAR DR. CONFLICT, Our executive director loves standing committees. These committees comprise sitting board members, past board members (once they are on a committee they don’t always leave when they leave the board), people from outside the board, the executive director, and usually a staff member or two.

Several issues repeat themselves year after year. The ED has each committee redefine itself, its purpose, and its goals annually, usually at the first meeting, so that new committee members (who have no real idea of what the agency does) make all kinds of suggestions. Since the members have no clue about the history, policies, or activities, the ideas can be in conflict with, or are already, current practices. Ninety-nine percent of the committee “goals” are, of course, staff work-related, and it becomes difficult for staff members to redirect the committee (the ED doesn’t), resist the need to say “we already do that,” or appear to be anything less than cooperative and enthusiastic without coming across as naysayers.

Hundreds of hours have been spent by staff preparing reports researching activities suggested by committee members that this agency has never had the ability or mission to carry out—usually something like providing consulting or creating a new service model that would require the investment

of millions. If that weren’t frustrating enough, similar ideas pop up every few years (with new members), and the work repeats with the same conclusions.

By the way, the ED has abdicated staff evaluations to a standing committee, so staff members are leery of contradicting committee members or correcting the ED. Instead they simply do the work, since it will be noted on the annual appraisal: “she seems not to be open to suggestion”; “he does not like input”; “staff does not take direction”; “staff needs to be more positive.” (Should I mention that significant portions of information provided to the committee by the ED to start the work are just plain wrong?)

If I may add one more wrinkle to the situation: the executive director has been known to invite individuals (usually family members of past or present clients, who are highly antagonistic toward the agency and with a history of unpleasantness to staff) to sit on the standing committee, under the concept that willingness to expose our operation is in the interest of “visibility.”

Not Standing for It Anymore

Dear Not Standing for It,

Dr. Conflict can’t speak to the issue of your executive director’s loving standing committees, as love may have nothing to do with it: an agency’s bylaws often codify such matters. When bylaws are

not explicit on the matter, however, many organizations trend toward an ad hoc committee approach. These task-specific committees have the benefit of preset deadlines and a beginning and end to their jobs, and that tends to work well for busy volunteers. Standing committees, on the other hand, tend to stagnate without an immediate need for product (and sometimes even with an immediate need). Dr. Conflict likes the idea of having non-board members on the committees. Outsiders bring valuable insights, and often become emissaries. Inviting former board members to attend keeps their wisdom around—if, in fact, they are wise.

Even in the case of standing committees, Dr. Conflict likes the annual practice of having each committee redefine itself. It is just good basic management. Moreover, it can be an excellent way to orient new board members. As you said, most board members haven’t a clue, and on-the-job training can be a very good thing. Even better, sometimes the best ideas for new ventures come from people like new board members, who know enough but not too much.

That said, Dr. Conflict is concerned about staff spending hundreds of hours preparing reports that go nowhere. If a standing committee meets four times a year for two hours, and staff spends forty hours supporting each meeting, it can easily add up to four weeks of work. Multiply this by six unnecessary committees,

and you have a half-time position. Appalling as this may be, Dr. Conflict has seen many such situations.

Being on a board is hard work and carries significant responsibility. Dr. Conflict cannot abide make-work for board members. Believe Dr. Conflict: no board member (other than a masochist) looks forward to attending committee meetings that add no value.

That's not to say that all committees are worthless. Whatever you call them—standing committee or not—some board-level committees should meet regularly. By board-level committees, Dr. Conflict means ones that help the board do its job (staff-level committees help the staff members do theirs).

The number of board-level committees an agency should have depends upon many variables, including the age and size of your agency. If you're going through a tough time with finances, you'd expect more finance committee meetings. A good rule of thumb is that committees should meet only as necessary—in other words, only if it adds value.

Another rule of thumb is that the fewer standing committees, the better. That tends to push work upward to the full board, which addresses two of the oldest complaints about boards: no red meat on the table, and boring meetings.¹

Dr. Conflict does not think it good practice for the executive director to abdicate staff evaluations to a standing committee. The ED should handle these evaluations directly, but if he or she wants to have board members riding along—for whatever reason, including feedback and counsel—that's a matter of personal preference.

Finally, Dr. Conflict does not know enough about how recruiting is done at your agency to weigh in on your concerns about inviting family members of clients to join the board. Federal grants,

for example, often require that a percentage of the board be clients.

So, what now? What are the next steps?

First, your executive director should work with the board to revisit its structure in general and job description in particular. Many organizations are playing with new designs, and the board may wish to think about some of these. Boards often unwittingly become dysfunctional because they don't know any better. This is especially true given that many executive directors are novices, resulting in the blind leading the blind.

When it comes to the job of the board, there are usually just three major duties: setting direction, monitoring performance, and delegating effectively—beginning with the board itself and stopping at the executive director.

Once done with the structure and job description review and honoring the rule that board-level committees should only help the board do its job, your agency likely needs a governance committee to deal with recruiting and onboarding new members. It definitely should have a finance/audit committee to assess performance. Some boards will empower an executive committee to help with delegation issues related to the executive director.

Relative to what most boards do, the three most popular committees are governance/nominating (83 percent); finance, including audit (83 percent); and executive (78 percent). Fundraising is a distant fourth (55 percent), followed by the also-rans of plain audit (27 percent), program (27 percent), and marketing/communications/PR (26 percent).²

Where's the development function to raise money? Where is the advocacy piece that builds allies? These are board *member* jobs, not board jobs. Boards don't raise money, and boards don't champion the agency to the community;

board members (and staff members) do. Remember that boards only exist when they are in session—at all other times they must do their work by delegating to others.

Second, you need to check your attitude. You have choices about how you conduct yourself with board members. Generally speaking, board members recognize that they can only do their job effectively if people like you enable them. Stop sitting on the sidelines and crying about how bad things are. You have the ability to courteously speak up and guide your board members to better performance. Pick yourself up and become the governance content expert for your agency. Keep in mind that “to be irrelevant would be a step forward for many boards,”³ and ask yourself what you can do to help move your agency's governance to excellence.

NOTES

1. Richard P. Chait, Thomas P. Holland, and Barbara E. Taylor, *Improving the Performance of Governing Boards* (Westport, CT: American Council on Education/Oryx Press, 1996), 1–2.
2. BoardSource, *Nonprofit Governance Index 2010* (Washington, DC, 2010), 24.
3. Mark Light, *The Strategic Board: The Step-by-Step Guide to High-Impact Governance* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2001), ix.

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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