



The Nonprofit Ethicist

by Woods Bowman

You know your organization is fighting the good fight—but what do you do when personality clashes turn your internal operations into something approaching civil war?

In this installment, the Ethicist gives you tips for defusing tensions and mastering diplomacy when things get messy.

DEAR NONPROFIT ETHICIST,
Several agencies in my town support the same population of disadvantaged individuals. The executive director of one of the agencies has a reputation for lying, being snappish, sending poorly written e-mail tirades, refusing to be held accountable, and denying past actions and statements. (You get the idea: this person is a poster child for narcissistic personality disorder.)

When this human hand grenade explodes, my, and any other, agency that shares responsibility for the same clients, gets hit with the shrapnel; yet my board thinks that our mission requires us to overlook personality issues. How do we manage this relationship to protect our clients and ourselves?

Disarmed

Dear Disarmed,
Stay focused on what's best for your clients, and the rest will take care of itself. By this I mean that he or she will probably continue to annoy you (I like

your shrapnel analogy) but try to think of such irritations as part of the price you pay for delivering the best service to your clients. When this person crosses the line and begins to hurt your ability to deliver for your clients, then it is time to build a firewall between your two organizations.

Dear Nonprofit Ethicist,

Many staff and board members have left the organization on whose board I sit; they have left because of a highly dysfunctional executive director who does not want to be managed by anyone, "spins" information to her own ends, and uses every Sun Tzu tactic to extinguish efforts to make changes.

For the majority of her time as ED, the board has been in interpersonal strife or organizational crisis; there is high board turnover as a result. Since the board has so many people who are new to boards as well as to the organization, this ED basically runs the agency and controls the board. She does this in two ways: (1) by dictating to the

inexperienced board members what their roles are and what they are not; and (2) by positioning herself as more oppressed than her board and staff. The underlying strategy here is to be able to, on any level, empower herself by making the other person appear ignorant. From this strategic home base, she can at any time begin delegitimizing anyone she perceives to be a threat—and this she does. There have been several "ugly" confrontations involving staff and board members being pushed out by her passive-aggressive tactics and masterful manipulation; the reasons for these ugly endings remain unclear—except in my case (I have since become a subject of these attacks).

This organization was once a world leader in its field; it was supported by government and used to consult on issues by media, academia, government, and others. Today the government that created the organization has little interest in it, and representatives no longer have time to attend its events. The only media that this organization

gets is an occasional op ed (it is no longer contacted to give comments on events); instead of acting as consultants on governmental policy development, representatives now attend only as members of the public giving depositions. Politically and in the media, the agency has become basically irrelevant. Most people in the community don't know of the organization, although in its own small circle it is valued and continues to provide the same services it has for many years, which is essentially public education.

This ED has effectively crippled innovation and leadership, and in doing so frittered away the wellness of the organization. Those who have attempted to do basic things (such as position the board to truly understand operations as they relate to the strategic priorities or move toward stating organizational objectives to focus the work of the organization) are targeted on a personal level and ultimately pushed out. Since people want to protect the integrity of the organization, nobody speaks of this dysfunction. How can this be addressed without compromising the reputation of the organization? In our case, it seems to be a toss-up: try from the inside and risk having your reputation ruined, or accede to this person's reign of control and warlike conflict that is bringing the agency closer each year to complete irrelevance.

Can this situation be reversed?

No Fun in Dysfunction

Dear No Fun,

The executive director may or may not have been responsible for the organization's decline, but abusive behavior and board subservience make it less likely that the situation will be reversed. If you want to try to turn things around, you will need to invest a lot of time in explaining the situation to new board members

before the executive director can get to them. When you have one or two staunch allies to take your side and second your motions, announce to the board that the Emperor has no clothes—and keep it up. Still, this may not work. In Hans Christian Andersen's story, the emperor suspected the truth of the matter but continued with his parade.

Dear Nonprofit Ethicist,

One of our board members is a nursing home administrator. This person is an officer, serves on the executive committee, and is the chair of the personnel committee. A volunteer and advocate for our organization has now applied for a middle-management-level position. His wife is a patient at the board member's nursing home. Should the board member be required to step down from any of the board roles?

Interested in Conflicts

Dear Interested,

I like to think of such problems in terms of "ethical distance." When a decision maker's personal interests are completely intertwined with his or her organizational responsibilities, the ethical distance is zero, and drastic interventions are needed to protect the organization. In the case you describe, the ethical distance is large between your board member and an individual who is both middle manager for your organization and the husband of a person in the board member's nursing home. I believe that a modest intervention should suffice, such as the interested board member recusing him- or herself on matters related to this individual. (Many states have anonymous hotlines for reporting nursing home abuse—I'm assuming your state is among them.)

Dear Nonprofit Ethicist,

As the director of a small nonprofit,

I recently received a request to write a letter of support for a grant being sought by a large organization with a reputation for chasing grant money and not being responsive to the needs of the community once they get it. I declined to write the letter and politely told them why. Word quickly spread throughout the community, and I am being told that I am the first to reject writing a support letter of request for any agency in our area. If I had provided the letter, I would have been supporting conduct that I do not find ethical; however, it sure would have been easier than the drama this has stirred up. I would make the same decision again, but I wonder what your thoughts are on this.

Odd Man Out

Dear Odd Man Out,

If you had misgivings about the organization's responsiveness to the community, then you were right to decline, but perhaps you could have handled your relations with the aggrieved organization more tactfully. There is a difference between honesty and candor: honesty is essential; candor is optional. Less candor might have served you better.

Woos Bowman is a professor of public service management at DePaul University, in Chicago, Illinois.

To comment on this article, write to us at feedback@npqmag.org. Order reprints from <http://store.nonprofitquarterly.org>, using code 200101.

Ask the Ethicist about Your Conundrum

Write to the Ethicist about your organization's ethical quandary at feedback@npqmag.org.