



Dr. Conflict

by Mark Light

DEAR DR. CONFLICT, I am the leader of a large non-profit. As a child, I was taught that the best way to solve a disagreement is for the folks involved to get together and sort it out. I just tell people to leave me alone and go solve the problem themselves. Guess what? No conflict! That's the easy way to deal with these things.

No Problems Here

Dear No Problems Here,
Where Dr. Conflict grew up, your approach was called "whistling past the graveyard." You simply whistle a happy tune when walking past the cemetery to create the illusion that there aren't any ghosts. But the ghosts are there. Just watch *The Sixth Sense*. I'm not surprised that your organization appears to have no conflict but wonder how many lawsuits are under way for unresolved conflicts that you ignored.

There are three primary reasons that conflicts arise.¹ First are incompatible goals, such as when Dr. Conflict's wife wants help with the chores but Dr. Conflict wants a beer.² Second is interference with goals, such as when Dr. Conflict's wife pours the beer down the sink because Dr. Conflict won't help.³

Third, conflicts arise because of scarce resources, including power. In essence, those with the power force the ones without it to acquiesce, often with a threat like, "If you tell the boss, you'll

be sorry." Though you might like to think that the "folks" have resolved their conflicts à la kumbayah, there's a much better chance that people have been coerced into silence. Maybe everyone is involved, maybe only one person. But you won't know unless you get involved. Dr. Conflict is not suggesting that you have to be the one to intervene—training your staff in conflict management and getting people to third-party mediation might be a better choice—but burying your head in the sand is not the answer.

To be fair, sometimes avoiding conflict is a good idea, especially when your safety is involved or the conflict doesn't matter to you. And avoidance may work for a while, but if power is at play, it can lead to an explosion, and sometimes a violent one. No wonder almost two-thirds of human resource professionals report that their company has experienced some sort of violence in recent years.⁴ Yes, it could be another bad-hair day for someone; it could also be something much worse. But if you keep your door closed, how do you know?

Dr. Conflict recommends that you stop avoiding conflict in your organization. The three things you can count on in life are death, taxes, and conflict . . . and maybe direct-mail appeals. Simply telling people to leave you alone until they've resolved their differences forces conflicts underground where it's very dark and people can get into trouble

very quickly. Conflicts don't disappear by simply whistling them away. Just ask Dr. Conflict's wife.

Dear Dr. Conflict,

I am so angry! I just had a meeting with my executive committee about my annual adjustment. Not only was it months overdue, but they gave me less than I put in the budget. And I was very careful about the amount I budgeted. I'm doing a great job, and I showed the committee members how I stacked up against my peers. What went wrong? Does my board want me to leave? What should I do now? Should I threaten to quit?

Underpaid

Dear Underpaid,

Dr. Conflict wonders whether you look both ways before crossing the street. Is your last will and testament in order, your bequest to your favorite nonprofit inked, life insurance paid up, final arrangements planned? Including a number for your compensation in the budget before your board approves it is like saying, "Come here, bus, flatten me like a pancake. I'm ready to die!"

And yet Dr. Conflict sympathizes with your situation. You tried to get the board to deal with your compensation three months before the end of the fiscal year, but the board didn't pay attention. You asked repeatedly; how many times do you have to ask, for goodness sake? Rather than cause a dustup, you got the

budget approved even with its unfinished business.

You ask what went wrong, so here's the bad news: You let the board shirk its responsibilities. Moreover, once you began the new fiscal year and started using that budget, you lost your leverage to get the matter addressed as part of a bigger picture and allowed the urgency to dissipate. Why worry now, hakuna matata!

The shame is that you did so many things right: You benchmarked your performance and your compensation against your peers; you came up with a number that was a fit with the data and the budget. But what you didn't do is hold your board accountable for doing its job. You wouldn't let the board overlook other potential catastrophes; why should your compensation be exempt?⁵

To be sure, some readers are thinking, "Wait a second here, I work for the board. Who am I to tell board members what to do? They're my bosses." Nonsense. As the executive director, you are at the center of the board's success.⁶ Dr. Conflict does not deny that working with your board is tough; governance is a world of "strange loops and tangled hierarchies," after all.⁷ But your board depends on you even if it never says so directly. As one successful executive said to Dr. Conflict, "The board is my shepherd, I shall not ignore."⁸

Now on to your other questions: If your board wanted you to leave, it would ignore you for a long time, the executive committee would fire you without notice, and the rest of the board would read about it in the newspaper.⁹ The board will let you know if it's time to leave; don't play the wounded bird.

But what should you do now? Don't give up. There's no rule that says you can ask for raises only once a year. Wait a couple of months, and then reopen the discussion. If you don't get what you want, try again every three or four months. Astonishingly, even though half of nonprofit executives want more compensation, only one out of four executives has ever asked for a raise.¹⁰ You

can be the exception to the rule. Asking for a raise is just like asking for a major gift; it takes planning and cultivation, but just like all fundraising, the biggest single error you'll make is not asking. Dr. Conflict hastens to add that this will not work with teenagers.

Finally, you ask whether to threaten to quit. For a threat to be credible, you have to be able to deliver and be willing to deliver, and the other party has to care if you deliver. That's what makes threats so dangerous. Threats almost always make things worse and are usually self-fulfilling prophecies. Moreover, people naturally resist threats and often find ways to get even. Watch out, your board members just might call your bluff and fire you instead. Dr. Conflict learned this the hard way by once threatening to withhold affections from his wife, which she quickly accepted as a generous offer of kindness.

ENDNOTES

1. W. W. Wilmot and J. L. Hocker, *Interpersonal Conflict*, 7th ed. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2007.
2. Dr. Conflict hopes that no one (especially his wife) would think that he would ever put a beer ahead of doing chores.
3. Recognizing that it would be right to help, Dr. Conflict would wisely apologize and ask his wife what he could do to compensate for his failings. In the conflict lexicon, this technique is commonly called *accommodation*, which helps you reduce your costs when you know you're going to lose. As Dr. Conflict likes to say, "If you're going to eat crow, eat it fresh."
4. E. Esen, "SHRM Workplace Violence Survey," Society for Human Resource Management, 2004.
5. Jeanne Peters and Timothy Wolfred argue that a "series of successive, short-tenure executives can do lingering harm to an agency's culture and performance." In other words, what Dr. Conflict calls a catastrophe. J. Peters & T. Wolfred. *Daring to lead: Nonprofit executive directors and their work experience*. San Francisco: CompassPoint Nonprofit Services (2001).

6. P. F. Drucker, "Lessons for Successful Nonprofit Governance," *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1990, pp. 7-14; R. Herman and R. Heimovics, "The Nonprofit Executive: Leader of the Board," *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1990, pp. 167-180; M. Light, *The Strategic Board: The Step-by-Step Guide to High-Impact Governance*. New York: Wiley, 2001; P. Light, *Pathways to Nonprofit Excellence*. Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2002; and B. Nanus and S.M. Dobbs, *Leaders Who Make a Difference: Essential Strategies for Meeting the Nonprofit Challenge*, 1st ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999.

7. M. Middleton, "Nonprofit Boards of Directors: Beyond the Governance Function," in W. W. Powell, ed., *The Nonprofit Sector: A Research Handbook*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987, p. 149.

8. Dr. Conflict heard this from Deborah Dailey, the CEO and president of Hospice of Dayton.

9. Dr. Conflict kids you not; this sort of thing happens regularly, especially in agencies with executive committees empowered to act on behalf of the board between meetings. See M. Light, *Executive Committee*. Washington: BoardSource, 2004.

10. J. Bell, R. Moyers, and T. Wolfred, *Daring to Lead 2006: A National Study of Nonprofit Executive Leadership*. San Francisco; Washington: CompassPoint Nonprofit Services, Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer Foundation, 2006.

DR. CONFLICT is the nom de plume of Mark Light. In addition to his work with First Light Group (www.firstlightgroup.com), he teaches at Case Western Reserve University and Antioch University McGregor. Along with his stimulating home life, he gets regular doses of conflict with the Dayton Mediation Center.

What conflicts are vexing you? Send your questions to Dr. Conflict at conflict@npqmag.org. The doctor will respond discreetly, and your questions will help others who face similar situations. Reprints of this article may be ordered from <http://store.nonprofitquarterly.org>, using code 150201.