



Dr. Conflict

by Mark Light

DEAR DR. CONFLICT, I was asked to take a leadership role in a volunteer-only nonprofit. My hope was to stimulate the coalition to move forward toward its goals. Unfortunately, two members of the coalition take an adamant stand against all my suggestions, regardless of the time I spend explaining how these ideas can help.

I have considered resigning from the board because I don't know whether I can ever win over these two board members. Discussions often become intense, which does not make for a good board meeting, and meetings are unproductive. I have asked both board members to reconsider their part in this conflict, but we seem to be at an impasse.

On an entirely different matter, we are trying to recruit younger blood to the board, but these millennials and boomers seem to lack respect for what each group brings to the table—and communicate quite differently—on a technological and an interpersonal level.

Leadership Is Tough

Dear Leadership Is Tough, Followers not following and millennials not respecting boomers—what is the world coming to? Here you are a reluctant leader who gets no respect: the Rodney

Dangerfield of the agency. But Dr. Conflict wonders why you care so much about these dissenters. If your board is the average size of 16, having two members who aren't overjoyed with your suggestions is hardly a worry. Simply have someone make the motion on your suggestion, discuss it, let the two adamants make their case, and then call the question. If your board is like most, simple majority carries the day.

Maybe you worry that the absence of unanimity is a failure of leadership, which is why you want to resign. You took the time to make your rational argument to the reluctant ones, and yet they still stand firm against you. Isn't unanimity the holy grail of good governance? Dr. Conflict wishes to disabuse you of this folly. The holy grail is for board members to debate and disagree, vote their conscience, and then support majority decisions—even those they just voted against.

A few years ago for a short eight months, Dr. Conflict sat on a board. He left after being called a malcontent largely because of his lone nay vote against borrowing money for a Porsche to be raffled off in a fundraiser. The organization was bereft of disagreement, and this past July, it finally closed its doors.

The point is that dissent is not only healthy; it's essential. Do you honestly think that heated discussions reflect

poorly on you as a leader? Quite the opposite. Because the vast majority of boards complain ad nauseam about boring meetings and a lack of red meat on the table, you're a saint, a hero; your meetings are exciting. A board that uses give-and-take discussion will always trump one using mere show and tell.

Perhaps you are concerned that calling for a vote is somehow antithetical to the board's work. The days of command-and-control directive leadership are supposed to be over, after all; participative leadership is in fashion. If you can't get everyone on the board on board, you have failed. But participative leadership in all circumstances is not good leadership at all. It's a foolish consistency, or the "hobgoblin of little minds," as Emerson says. Do you really believe that in a crisis, when time is at a premium, people want participative leadership? Please, what everyone wants is direction. And if you don't provide it, they will likely find someone who will—period.

There are numerous models for bringing issues forward to a group of people, including a board of directors. Some models are quite complicated, but here are two useful rules of thumb for whether to use directive or participative approaches using time as the key situational variable:

- If time is of the essence, lean toward

directive leadership.

- If time is not of the essence, lean toward participative leadership.

Other situational variables to keep in mind include the type and intensity of pushback you might get, the power of those pushing back, whether you have all the smarts needed, and the stakes involved in the decision. Assuming that the first rule is true, go ahead and implement your suggestions.

Still, Dr. Conflict wonders whether there isn't a good reason why the two dissenters have pushed back. Maybe their acceptance is really important. Maybe it's not in your job description to implement suggestions without unanimous support. Or maybe, just maybe, your suggestions aren't really as good as you think they are. After all, a bad idea isn't improved by long-winded explanations; it's still a bad idea. So how about taking off the hair shirt for a minute and asking the dissenters what's going on with the pushback? What do they think should be done? And as long as you're at it, ask the other board members the same questions. Just remember: it takes a thick skin to be a leader, and it might not be pleasant to hear the answers.

Now what about those millennials? For purists, millennials are not yet out of elementary school, but most now combine echo boomers (those born between 1977 and 2000) and the Millennium Generation (those born since 2000). This generation is known by a variety of names, including Generation Y and Generation Next. They've also been called the Boomerang Generation, which is particularly apropos considering that during the current economic crisis, many moved back home.

No matter what you call them, though, they make up a third of the population, give or take, and are just now coming into their own. Though there is debate about how best to lead this generation, there is near-unanimity that its members are and will be high maintenance.

Though the phrase "What's in it for me?" has also been used to describe this generation, Dr. Conflict wonders how this is different from the attitude of any other generation. So what if they think in transactional terms of "What's in for me?" So what if they are concerned about their personal life and striking a balance with work? So what if they want a fair deal? And you don't?

The wonderful thing is that the millennials are straightforward about what they want. For sure, it will be harder to inspire them with visionary leadership, but that isn't such a bad thing. Indeed, there is a small but growing group of experts that argues that transactional leadership, which emphasizes reciprocity, is inherently more ethical than transformation leadership, which stresses charisma and vision.

In the end, it is not about what the millennials or boomers want but what we all deserve in the workplace: "respect, fair treatment, equality, balance, flexibility, appropriate feedback, job enhancement, and advancement opportunities." These goals were as important to our parents and they are to us now and as they will be to the class of 2030. Thank goodness this generation will be out there making us all more honest.

DR. CONFLICT is the pen name of Mark Light. In addition to his work with First Light Group (www.firstlightgroup.com), Light teaches at the Mandel Center for Nonprofit Organizations at Case Western Reserve University. Along with his stimulating home life, he gets regular doses of conflict at the Dayton Mediation Center, where he is a mediator.

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