

Dr. Conflict

by Mark Light

DEAR DR. CONFLICT,
This situation is hard to write about, but here goes.

I am the treasurer of the board at our local women's shelter. It is a small group, which is now 17 years old. Throughout that time, one woman has led the organization, and it has gone through many changes. In my opinion, she is much loved and looked up to, but . . .

This past October, she was diagnosed with a terminal disease, and her prognosis is that she will not live more than another few weeks. She has teenage children who are still recovering from the death of her partner three years ago. So, you may ask, how does this have anything to do with conflict?

Well, the board has decided not to recognize her publicly during her remaining days, despite staff's continued requests. Some members are angry about the way she chose to leave: she disappeared and remained incommunicado for weeks after her diagnosis. Obviously, this wreaked havoc on the organization.

Her family blocked all communication from the board, which led to a few tense exchanges. Some members of the community knew what was going on before the board did. And probably apropos for these times, when I went into the books, I found a frail budget and a fairly critical deadline left undone. I was able to save most of the money in question, but the board was irate about what it termed her "flagrant neglect" of duty.

Despite a nonprofit founder's terminal illness, board members are angry about the way she chose to leave.

As background, the organization has been rocked by tragedy of late. During the past year, two former residents in the community were killed as well.

The thing is, I know the board is upset and probably weirdly grieving. But I am afraid that over the next few weeks the organization will wound itself mortally by leaving a resolution

with the director undone. I am not a big mover or shaker on the board, so it is hard to insert myself. Am I being overdramatic? How can I talk to those involved and make a difference? Help!

Don't Know What to Do

Dear Don't Know What to Do,
At first, Dr. Conflict had a hard time making sense of your problem. Is it really that hard to figure out what to do? Get out your cookbook and casserole dish, make a wonderful dinner, take it to the founder's house, beg for forgiveness, and ask what you can do to help. If the rest of the board won't join you, forget about them; do the right thing, and get your rear in gear.

But then Dr. Conflict hesitated. Maybe he missed something. It's true that Dr. Conflict isn't always the brightest bulb on the tree, but most of the time he can figure out what's going on in a conflict. After all, if you accept one of the classic definitions, there are only three causes of conflict: "An expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who

perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals.”¹

Incompatible goals can mean that the parties want the same thing but there’s not enough to go around. The board wants the founder to make time for work, but she wants time with her family. Incompatible goals could also mean that the parties want different things. The board wants her to put the nonprofit’s house in order, but she wants to make the best of the time she has left. Interference from others is pretty standard stuff. The board wants the founder to ensure that the nonprofit she started lives on; her family is running interference to protect her from this folly.

In this situation, there are a great many scarce resources, including funding, talent, and time, of which your founder has little left.

That said, in a conflict the typical scarce resources are power (the ability to get things done in the face of resistance) and self-esteem (pride in oneself). Clearly the board doesn’t have the power to make the founder do anything. And it is way low on self-esteem—not that the members are self-aware enough to recognize this. They seem chock-full of self-pride, but their reflection is false. The board was irate about the founder’s “flagrant neglect” of duty? Really? Don’t any of these movers and shakers ever look in the mirror? Have a pulse? Are they channeling Scrooge before his conversion? You say the board is “probably weirdly grieving”; Dr. Conflict says the board is heartbreakingly clueless.

Of course, your conflict isn’t really about the board’s ham-handed, callous, narcissistic, and tone-deaf response to the terminal illness of your founder;² it’s about brokering a way to heal the board’s self-inflicted mortal wound. Unfortunately you have incompatible goals with the board. You want to see a resolution in

your founder’s remaining days, but your board is indignant with misplaced anger. And you have little—if any—power to get these influential people to listen. But this doesn’t prevent you from speaking up, does it? You are the treasurer, after all, an officer of the board, for heaven’s sake.

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in your founder’s remaining days,
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Dr. Conflict’s heart breaks for the founder of the agency. After 17 years of blood, sweat, and tears, and now, in the last moments of the founder’s life, all the board can do is complain that about being the last to know about her illness? Instead of pitching in and helping out, this board bickers and gripes. Dr. Conflict has no sympathy for these board members—none at all.

Here is what you must do now: demand that the board do the right thing immediately—what it should have done the minute it learned of your founder’s illness—which is to lend a hand. And if the board cannot do so, submit your resignation to this callow group of dunderheads, go to see the founder yourself (do not call, do not ask permission, go in person), ask forgiveness for what has happened, and offer her your help in this moment of need.

If you are too late and she has passed away, you must still demand that the board take action and, in one way or another, make the journey. Embolden yourself with the words of Suzanne Massie: “All that the Devil asks is acquiescence, not struggle, not conflict. Acquiescence.” And don’t forget the casserole. Even better: add a week’s worth of meals to put in the freezer. It’s a good start on the way to redemption.


ENDNOTES

1. William W. Wilmot and Joyce L. Hocker, *Interpersonal Conflict*, 7th ed. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2007, 9.
2. Dr. Conflict hopes the reader is not confused about how he really feels.

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 Non-profit 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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