



Dr. Conflict

by Mark Light

DEAR DR. CONFLICT, The nonprofit I helped found has experienced quite a bit of growth over the last few years, and our opportunities abound. This is a good thing, right? But as we have developed, the breadth of the work has expanded and the leadership role has been divided in two—as is common in our field of work—into a kind of artistic director and a business director.

I am taking the role of artistic director, and another, younger staff person has the other role, with my support. She is the kind of brave soul who will wade into the stormiest waters with a sense of purpose, but she has never been in a position of leadership, and her judgment needs coaching at times. Not a serious issue, but it's there. I am very willing to help her make that transition.

So where's the rub?

She and I do fight. We always have, for the ten years we have both been here. These are generally quick flare-ups that blow over, with apologies all around, but there is always a period during which we are both fuming and hurt. The thing is, before now I was always able to pull rank to say this is the way something needs to go. But I cannot do that anymore, so I have lost my leverage.

We have had a few interactions this past week where things needed to be done quickly, and we were right in the middle of the situation, disagreeing

with each other in front of others about how something needed to be handled.

In private, I yelled at her, "I'm done—you just be Little Miss Executive Director!" (Or so she tells me. I remember nothing.) And she accused me of disallowing her opinion and said she was done, too, and did not need to take my s***.

The thing is, I was once—a long time ago—a codirector, and I know how hard it is. Now I am older and feel exhausted by even the thought of more conflict. But I know that I am probably likely to have lots of it here.

What's a baby boomer who recognizes her own mortality to do?

Miss Founder, Artistic Director

Dear Dr. Conflict,

I've recently had the amazing opportunity to colead, with the founder, an organization I've been part of for ten years. Age has never been an issue with us, and we have worked very well together over the years, which is one of the main reasons this coleadership model has arisen. (My position now directly reports to the board.) Sure, we've had our fights, but we've always been able to move on.

But with her status as a founder and the fact that she's some years older than me, you can see how this could be dangerous territory, and I'm afraid that in my zeal to get started I have stepped on some toes. This week, for example, we

had several meetings with stakeholders, and we began to cover topic areas that my coleader and I had not previously discussed. We had a disagreement about how to approach some work, which we realized only when we had already gotten into the discussion.

Not knowing what to do, and not reading my coleader's clues to table the discussion until she and I had a chance to talk, I continued to make my point. Only after I was done did I realize that I had offended my coleader. And I realized the extent of my coleader's unhappiness after a rather blustery verbal fight the following day, which ended in tears.

My question is, given our complex relationship and history, and given the challenge of coleadership, what is the right way to handle this and the many other potentially contentious decisions we have before us if this coleadership model is to work?

Little Miss, Business Director

Dear Miss Founder and Little Miss, Dr. Conflict almost addressed you as equals, but when he read the letters side-by-side he could see that there is some confusion in this regard. Notice that Miss Founder describes the relationship as "kind of an artistic director and a business director," whereas Little Miss calls it a "coleadership model," where each of you is a direct report to the board. Miss Founder says that the "younger

staff person has the other role with my support” and “needs coaching”; Little Miss calls herself a coleader and refers to her counterpart as a founder and with obvious respect bordering on reverence.

To be fair, the coleadership model is the structural choice at many regional theaters and dance companies, but it is no walk in the park. And Dr. Conflict knows this from personal experience—he served as executive director at the Louisville Ballet for seven years in partnership with the artistic director.

So how do you make the relationship work? Dr. Conflict would like to remind you that for any organization to achieve results, two things must happen from the get-go: first, the work must be clearly divided into definable tasks; second, the work must be coordinated.¹

With regard to clear delegation—the division of labor as it were—you two seem pretty darn confused. Is Little Miss a coleader, as she describes herself eight times in her letter, or is she the “other role with my support” that Miss Founder talks about?

If you’re going to use the coleadership approach, start by clarifying the domains that are within your respective purviews, divide the labor, sharpen the duties. Typically you’d see Little Miss covering administration, marketing, and development. Miss Founder would be responsible for the programming. Being clear about duties is the number-one easiest way to improve any agency’s effectiveness.² So be clear about it.

Finally, make sure that your titles reflect a true arts coleadership model: Miss Founder is called artistic director and Little Miss is either the managing director or the executive director (if she’s particularly seasoned or the agency is larger in scale). Business director is a lower-level title that is subordinate to the artistic director.

Having divided your labor clearly,

you’re ready to deal with the matter of coordinating your work. The way to do this is to sit down together and reach an understanding of the rules of engagement, your code of conduct, the guidelines of behavior. Is it okay to have silent clues followed by verbal brawling? How do you want to deal with dissent? How do you want to resolve conflict?

Dr. Conflict does not mean to suggest that what you’re doing now is inappropriate. You are both pretty doggone good at managing conflict, in his humble opinion: You’re getting things out on the table, working through them, and you’ve even contacted Dr. Conflict for advice. You two have game, no doubt about it. If you’re looking for Dr. Conflict to wag his finger at you, he won’t. Better that you be mixing it up than bottling it in.

Here’s why: coworkers almost always have clear supervisors—call them what you will, be it coaches or bosses—who can mediate intractable disputes. You have a board (herd of cats is the oft-used metaphor, but Dr. Conflict prefers herd of turtles). Granted, you may have a wonderful board chair or other person who can help out, but you work for the board in general. And herds of turtles are slow moving, to put it mildly. Moreover, if there’s one thing Dr. Conflict has learned the hard way it’s that your board, its members, and the stakeholders do not want to mediate your conflicts any more than in-laws want to do the same for married couples. If you want therapy, see a therapist.

Many readers may have been hoping that Dr. Conflict was going to take Miss Founder to the woodshed simply for being a founder who is having some trouble letting go. But those readers are going to be disappointed. Dr. Conflict likes the progress that Miss Founder is making, and he respects the care that Little Miss is taking in the process. These are two really thoughtful people who

want the best for the organization and each other. And they seem to be succeeding but perhaps are being a bit too hard on themselves for the inevitable clashes between their complementary but not identical personalities.

If you don’t want conflict, crush it with power or drink a lot of Jack Daniel’s. But if you want to engage the strengths of coleaders—or for that matter of coworkers, board members, and volunteers, all of whom bring different skills and personalities to the party—conflict is a given. Without it, you will clearly be in trouble or working with a bunch of flatterers.

Got success? Get conflict.

ENDNOTES

1. Dr. Conflict’s thinking on this topic is informed by Henry Mintzberg, who writes, “Every organized human activity—from the making of pots to the placing of a man on the moon—gives rise to [these] two fundamental and opposing requirements.” (Henry Mintzberg, *Structure in Fives: Designing Effective Organizations*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1983, 2.)
2. This observation comes from a study by Dr. Conflict that found unclear duties to be the single most powerful explanation for poorly performing governance. (Mark Light, *Results Now for Nonprofits: Purpose, Strategy, Operations, and Governance*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2011.)

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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