



Dr. Conflict

by Mark Light, MBA, PhD

Dr. Conflict allows that outsourcing noncore functions can be an effective time and cost saver—but, he advises, keep such important functions as fundraising and grant reporting in-house. And is your supervisor a narcissistic nutcase? Dr. Conflict says, consider talking to an attorney, do not interact with your supervisor without witnesses nearby, and get your networking into gear: you may need a new job.

DEAR DR. CONFLICT, We are considering contracting out for some of our management services (fundraising and grant reporting). What concerns and/or questions should we be raising with respect to the fact that the service provider will also have other nonprofit clients with similar missions? We would appreciate any thoughts or resource links about shared management functions.

Concerned

Dear Concerned, If what you're after is how to deal with confidentiality, address it directly with your outsourcer. But Dr. Conflict thinks you ought to be thinking more broadly. You could do this by imagining hiring an employee—which, in effect, you are.

And when it comes to doing that right, you must “Hire hard, manage easy.”¹

Your first step is to spec the job itself. Outline the tasks, duties, and responsibilities for the job. Next, clarify the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities to do that job successfully. Finally, nail down the performance expectations that describe “what the job accomplishes and how performance is measured in key areas.”² This would include maintaining the confidentiality of your account, timeliness of reporting, and other guidelines of conduct.

Only after having defined the job can you recruit a talent pool. The best method is referrals: a “full 77 percent” of industry leaders say it is their first choice.³ Be careful here, as referrals are only as good as the source; if you solicit

from losers, you'll get losers.⁴

Selecting the best candidate comes from structured behavioral panel interviews. *Structured* means using a standardized set of questions that you ask the applicant, to make comparisons easier. *Behavioral* means asking applicants for “specific examples of how they have performed a certain task or handled a problem in the past.”⁵ *Panel* means having a group of people meet at the same time with each applicant.

To be sure, outsourcing noncore functions can be enormously productive and cost-effective, and many agencies outsource payroll functions without hesitation. But according to a Blackbaud survey, it is relatively rare in fundraising except for back-office activities like data/computer systems, at 13 percent,

and accounting, at 8 percent; face-to-face fundraising comes in at just 1 percent.⁶

You get Dr. Conflict's drift here, yes? Face-to-face fundraising takes a deft hand from the executive director and from a board member who often comes along. Keep the important work in-house, where you can give it a personal touch, and outsource the rest.

Dear Dr. Conflict,

For a little over the past two years, I have been working for a nonprofit in a very tenuous and more often than not hostile, small-office work environment. My direct supervisor has been the director of operations for the past eight years or so and since arriving at the organization has systematically fired or "run off" anyone who has opposed her (either in terms of work or personality). The ED is less than two years away from retirement, and her efforts to stymie any conflicts that do arise are hesitant, ineffectual, and in many ways resigned to the erratic wishes of my supervisor.

Yesterday, my supervisor did something that on many occasions she has snapped at me not to do. When I tried to establish my boundaries by asking her not to do it in the future, she took offense. She waited until everyone in the office had left to verbally "go at" me, listing all of the reasons why what I had said was not okay. She began by telling me I had made her really mad, and that she was my boss and I could not talk to her that way. Despite my calmly trying to tell her I was just trying to do my job, develop boundaries that I felt had been lacking, and hadn't meant to offend her, she broke into tears and told me that she was going to have a panic attack. I ended up saying whatever I could to get her to calm down.

I strongly believe that the only reason I have made it this long is because I have always tried to appease her. At this point (two years in) I am working harder than ever for the organization—wearing more hats, and doing more projects that require me to make my own statements and opinions known. I am at the point where the only "out" I see is either looking for a new job or applying for grad school. My ED and supervisor have told me on multiple occasions how valuable I am to the organization, but this is just schizophrenic. How can I survive?

Desperate

Dear Desperate,

Expert Robert Sutton can offer you some tips for how you might "limit the damage . . . by learning not to give a damn about those jerks."⁷ But with an ED two years away from retirement, you're in a world of hurt. You should most certainly arrange your schedule so that you're never without witnesses close by. And if your supervisor goes on the attack when you are alone, protect yourself by walking away.

You should also consider talking to an attorney about whether you have cause for action. And, consider discussing the situation with a professional counselor to see why you are staying put when you say you have other options, including graduate school. Maybe you can also gain insights into the boundary-setting issues you wrote about.

The answer to how you can survive in this den of jerks is that you probably can't. Start your networking engine right now so that you'll be on everyone's "you'd be perfect for this" referral list.⁸ In the meantime, stay connected with friends and family; you need them for loving support to counterbalance the toxicity.

NOTES

1. Robert L. Mathis, John H. Jackson, and Sean R. Valentine, *Human Resource Management*, 14th ed. (Stamford, CT: Cengage Learning, 2014), 220.
2. Mathis and Jackson, *Human Resource Management: Essential Perspectives* (Mason, OH: South-Western, 2012), 238.
3. Geoff Smart and Randy Street, *Who: The A Method for Hiring* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2008), 49–50.
4. Stephen Burks, Bo Cowgill, Mitchell Hoffman, and Michael Housman, "You'd Be Perfect for This": *Understanding the Value of Hiring through Referrals*, Discussion Paper No. 7382 (Bonn, Germany: The Institute for the Study of Labor [IZA], 2013), 13, <http://ftp.iza.org/dp7382.pdf>.
5. Mathis, Jackson, and Valentine, *Human Resource Management*, 238.
6. Blackbaud, *2010 State of the Nonprofit Industry Survey: North America Survey Results* (Charleston, SC: Blackbaud, Inc., 2010), 13, www.blackbaud.com/files/resources/downloads/Research_SONI_NorthAmericanResults.pdf.
7. Robert I. Sutton, *The No Asshole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One that Isn't* (New York: Business Plus, 2010), 150.
8. Burks, Cowgill, Hoffman, and Housman, "You'd Be Perfect for This."

DR. CONFLICT is the pen name of Mark Light, MBA, PhD. In addition to his work with First Light Group (www.firstlightgroup.com), Light is executive in residence at DePaul University School of Public Service, where he teaches strategic management, human resource management, and ethical leadership. John Wiley & Sons published his most recent book—*Results Now*—in 2011.

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