



## Dr. Conflict

by Mark Light

**D**EAR DR. CONFLICT, I have a staff member who, for lack of a better term, is a bit *colorful*. Other than this personality trait, she is an excellent employee. When she was hired, we discussed the importance of our image in the small community in which we operate as well as the need for appropriate behavior.

A board member learned that this staff member is loud and belligerent at the local high school's ball games, and this board member believes that the employee is a detriment to our organization. I believe that when it comes to high-school sports, there is nothing sane and rational about parents and coaches. Moreover, I have attended some of these ball games and have never witnessed questionable behavior.

I don't believe that this board member has ever attended a ball game and, thus, seen this conduct in action. Still, the coach is a good friend of the board member and has leaned on him hard. This board member is very critical and likes power and control. Since I am the executive director, how do I deal with this?

Take Me Out of the Ball Game

*Dear Take Me Out,*  
Let's see if Dr. Conflict has this right: The coach is annoyed by your excellent staff member's "Throw the bum out" bel-

*ligerence at ball games and has pressured your alpha-male board member to make you make her stop. And now you want some advice about what to do.*

*Some readers might be inclined to roll their eyes and say, "Give it a rest." And they may be right. The employee was at a ball game and not an agency function; yelling at sports events is as American as mom and apple pie (or, in Dr. Conflict's case, beer and pizza). In other words, what she does on her own time is no one's business—case closed, and fuggitaboutit already.*

*The problem is that you and your board members are never really off the clock; you're always representing your organization, and that goes for your staff as well. This is largely because everyone in your community has a vested interest in your organization; the community pays higher taxes so that your organization doesn't have to. Moreover, nonprofits have a special role to play in society—a trusted one, at that—and are held to higher standards of conduct. No, it might not seem fair that you're on 24/7, that you're not a civilian, but that's the reality. So let's put aside the "Mind your own business" argument and understand that a staffer's conduct matters all the time for everyone—paid and unpaid—who works at your organization.*

*As in every conflict, there are only two*

*real choices: avoid or engage. Now it's entirely possible that simply ignoring or paying lip service to your board member's complaint will be enough; this is what Dr. Conflict calls the "Maybe it will go away" method. Goodness knows you've been to the games and found nothing to be concerned about; you've done enough, and it's time to move on. This board member needs to get a hobby, get a life, get a prescription; it's not his job to be the conduct police for your crew.*

*To those who suggest ignoring the board member, Dr. Conflict's experience is that this approach usually works best with those you'll never see again, folks you don't care about, and situations that don't matter much. We all learned this principle in first grade with schoolyard bullies: find different routes to class, don't push back, never let them see you cry, ignore them.*

*The trouble is that your board member doesn't sound like he'll go quietly into the night. Coupled with his need for power and control, he may very well become a board chair someday soon or, when you're up for a raise review, a member of the compensation committee. You've got skin in this game, and avoiding the conflict won't necessarily help.*

*The other consideration is that your board member is arguably just doing his job. You've asked your board members to*

*be champions in the community for your agency and to be your “antenna,” right? And you’ve begged them to help with fundraising, yes? You want them out there hitting home runs but don’t want them to tell you about fouls? Doesn’t being a good member include protecting the reputation of the agency?*

*In other words, it could be that your board member’s antenna has picked up something real about your employee. When this employee was hired, didn’t you discuss appropriate behavior, and to some degree does her behavior indicate that she ignored the discussion? To be fair, Dr. Conflict knows you are concerned about your board member’s agenda; you said that he likes power and control and is critical. But that pretty much describes most board members; you don’t invite folks to join a board for campfires, “Kumbayah” sing-alongs, and marshmallows. A board member can make a difference for a lot of reasons, but being a wimp isn’t one of them. In his defense, he didn’t go directly to your staff member and seems to respect your authority enough to have brought the issue to your attention instead, so maybe he deserves the benefit of the doubt.*

*If avoiding the conflict here seems ill advised, then engaging is the way to go. In first grade, you learned two other rules about schoolyard bullies: tell an adult, and stand up for yourself. You should start by telling the “adult”—in this case, your board chair—and ask his advice; it’s the chair’s job to be there for you. Moreover, because the board member reports to the chair, this issue matters to both of you, not you alone. Maybe your board chair will do the eye-roll thing and tell you to let it go, but maybe not.*

*Assuming that you and your chair decide that the concerns merit attention, you need to stand up for yourself. You might do your own review by touching*

*base with the coach and getting his perspective; you could then visit with the staff member for her point of view. That could give you and your board chair enough information to make a decision and then close the loop with the board member. Be sure to thank your board member for bringing the matter to your attention. After all, that’s part of a board member’s job.*

**DR. CONFLICT** is the nom de plume of Mark Light. In addition to his work with First Light Group ([www.firstlightgroup.com](http://www.firstlightgroup.com)), Light teaches at Case Western Reserve University and Antioch University McGregor. 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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