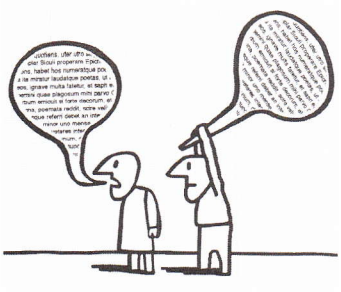

Dr. Conflict

by Mark Light

DEAR DR. CONFLICT,

I am the executive director at a small but dynamic nonprofit. Two months ago, my board informed me that it would launch a search for my replacement. Our organization has been through a rough couple of years after the previous administration left and created a severe budget deficit of nearly 20 percent of the total.

After I recognized the need for new skills on the board that some members lacked, I recruited local business people, who in turn recruited additional members. Unfortunately, for this group, micromanagement has been the rule of thumb over the past 18 months. The mostly absent board leader does not advocate a teamwork ethic and has undermined my authority with board members and staff.

It is now commonly acceptable for board members to have conversations with staff about other staff members, about department heads, and about me. Unfortunately, a few staff members are quite comfortable with this arrangement and often exploit it. At this point, I have little authority with staff.

I have sent out my résumé but have not received solid feedback. I do not want to leave this organization because I still believe in its mission and am proud of my contribution to turning things around. But I fear that too much dysfunctional behavior has made it very difficult for me to successfully fill a different position in the organization.

Woe Is Me

Dear Woe Is Me,

To be frank, there may be very little you can do now. You regrettably missed several chances to "nip it in the bud," as Barney Fife used to say. That's because you forgot a fundamental law of nature and leadership.

Although there is debate about the origin of the concept—some say it was the philosopher Parmenides, others attribute it to Aristotle—you got into this mess because nature abhors a vacuum. Remember that eighth-grade science experiment in which a teacher put a dab of shaving cream into a vacuum jar and then pumped out the air? How the shaving cream grew into a massive blob and filled the empty space? And how the blob dissipated when the air was let back in?

Now imagine you're inside that jar. Instead of shaving cream, there are micromanaging, chain-of-command-breaking board members. The more you avoid them, the more they expand their influence until you are obliterated. Do you get the picture? Your avoidance created the blob that ate your nonprofit and your job. In other words, human nature abhors a vacuum.

If there's a vacuum in the leadership of a nonprofit, especially when a major problem arises, an executive director must act quickly or someone else will. That someone might be a board member, a staff member, a funder, or even the press. But trust Dr. Conflict: someone always fills a vacuum.

Some may think that leading by example—walking your talk—is enough to stop bad behavior. "If my board members and employees see that I respect the chain of command, they'll do it too," the thinking goes. But this greeting-card leadership doesn't deliver and certainly doesn't fill the vacuum. When you see something major go wrong in your agency, you have to take action. Walking the talk of good behavior is fine, but to be truly effective and fill the vacuum, you

must also actively oppose bad behavior.

You had two opportunities to oppose the bad behavior of your board members. First, when you recruited these skilled board members, you missed the chance to explain the rules. "But surely," you say, "board members know that disrespecting the chain of command is a bad thing." Last time Dr. Conflict checked, clairvoyance was an elusive art practiced only by the Amazing Kreskin. Your board members may be a lot of things, but they aren't mind readers. Neither is your staff.

You can be excused for not establishing the rules up front; only a rare board clarifies its guidelines of behavior. Oh, sure, most boards have job descriptions for the board, and a good number also have them for board members. But how many have guidelines of conduct? After all, it is one thing to say board members have a duty to raise funds and quite another to say that they should respect the chain of command.

This is why Dr. Conflict recommends that boards craft guidelines of conduct for themselves, for committees and officers, for board members, and for the executive director. Taking the time to do so—and it doesn't take much—is the low-hanging fruit of better boards. This way you have the rules to explain up front and it becomes much easier to address the problems. "Remember at our meeting before joining the board and then again at the orientation when we talked about micromanagement and chain of command?"

Second, you missed the chance to address the micromanagement and accountability breaches when they first arose. Plenty of conflicts are worth avoiding, including those that don't matter (i.e., when aggressive telemarketers call, just hang up) and some that do (i.e., when assaulted by a mugger with a gun, give up your wallet). But micromanagement and breaking the chain of command don't fall into the don't-matter category.

With or without guidelines in place, you should always use Dr. Conflict's Secret Number One to get issues out in the open. Conflict begins with the word you *and ends with* I. *When you raise the issue, use statements that begin with* I. *When you start with* you, *others are likely to be put on the defensive. "You're overstepping your authority when you go around my back to my staff members" will raise hackles, as opposed to "I am concerned that my staff members are becoming confused about whom they work for."*

When you describe the problem behavior—as specifically as possible—continue to use I *statements. Include what has happened as a result of the behavior, which can include how it makes you feel. Remember that you want to enlist the other party to help you, and you can't do that with* you *statements and generalities. The remarkable thing about* I *statements is they often beget* I *statements from the other party. That's because* I *statements require self-disclosure, which in turn builds trust that naturally elicits reciprocation.*

There's nothing you can do now about most of what has happened. But you can try to move forward. Your best bet is to begin with the board chair and with the best I *statement of all: "I need your help." And then use more* I *statements to find a way to move forward.*

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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