



Dr. Conflict

by Mark Light, MBA, PhD

Covert infighting and stifled disagreement? A healthy workplace supports healthy conflict, and the first step toward achieving this is diagnosing your organization's culture. Then, choose the culture you want and model it consistently—for it's the daily behavior of leaders that shapes the environment.

DEAR DR. CONFLICT,
I believe that a bit of conflict in an agency is a good thing if you use it to open up discussion (and do it in a respectful manner). That said, I am a new ED at an agency where conflict seems to be completely hidden.

The agency has been through a rough patch, with the last ED being removed due to sexual harassment and after ruling for a number of years with an iron fist. This era of domination seems to have created a stifled culture where staff do not—or are not able to—openly discuss conflicts. Any action or issue that causes a flicker of conflict is buried and then treated by staff in a passive-aggressive manner with one another or via gossip.

We have been doing some training on basic communication as a start, and working on some agency values (which did not exist) to begin to get at this idea. But what other tools can I use to help create a culture where we have healthy conflict and fair fights?

New Kid on the Block

Dear New Kid on the Block,
 What could be better than a culture that supports healthy conflict and fair fights? Culture can be very hard to change, however, and the “iron fist” culture that you inherited is one of the toughest. Staff behavior reflects the difficulty you face.

Some may advise that you confront your staff and show them the way through modeling. That may work, and it could be a good short-term solution, but Dr. Conflict advises you to take a long-view approach and do it right.

When it comes to definitions, Edgar Schein says culture is “a pattern of shared basic assumptions [. . .] to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel.”¹ Kim Cameron and Robert Quinn call it “‘how things are around here.’ It reflects the prevailing ideology that people carry inside their heads. It conveys a sense of identity to employees, provides unwritten and often unspoken guidelines for how to get along in the organization.”² Gerald Driskill and Angela Laird Brenton describe it as an organization’s “unique way of doing things.”³ Dr. Conflict describes culture as the humidity of an organization. You can’t see humidity in the air but you sure can feel it, and it affects the work you do. And what’s the humidity at your place? Stifling.

So where to begin? Start with a clear-headed diagnosis of your culture. John Kotter and James Heskett use two levels to define the elements of culture.⁴ Easy-to-change group behavior norms are “patterns or style of an organization that new employees are automatically encouraged to follow”; difficult-to-change shared values “tend to persist over time even

when group membership changes.”⁵ Your culture seems to be the latter, since your predecessor was responsible for the behaviors your staff exhibits now.

Schein says that culture has three levels: the first level is artifacts that you can see, including “visible and feelable structures and processes”; the second is espoused beliefs like “ideals, goals, values, aspirations, and ideologies”; the third is the basic, underlying assumptions that are “unconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs and values [that] determine behavior, perception, thought, and feeling.”⁶

Take a moment now and look around. What artifacts do you see? Do you see open or closed doors? What about inviting places for people to gather? What visible things do you see or feel that might be affecting open communication?

What about the espoused beliefs and values? You are right to be working on them, but wrap it up pronto; your values “become the foundation of the organization’s culture.”⁷ Be sure to “behavioralize” them—to make them seeable in action. For example, if you say that trustworthiness is a value, then seeable behaviors might be keeping promises, telling the whole truth, and owning your actions.

Once you have a general handle on your culture, you can use a nifty tool called the Organizational Culture Assessment Instrument (OCAI) from Cameron

and Quinn to map your culture across four quadrants: clan (collaborate), adhocracy (create), hierarchy (control), and market (compete).⁸ Then, decide on your preferred culture. (Your letter implies that you desire more of an adhocracy culture, where “people stick their necks out and take risks.”)⁹

Cameron and Quinn advise that you now “identify key stories and incidents that characterize the preferred future culture” and then decide which one or two to use for illustrating the path. They then suggest that you develop an implementation plan with key strategies, small wins to achieve quickly, skills needed to lead the change, measures for accountability, and a communication plan.¹⁰ Be sure that your values and behaviors match up with what you want.

Schein offers six primary embedding mechanisms: (1) what leaders pay attention to, measure, and control on a regular basis; (2) how leaders react to critical incidents and organization crises; (3) how leaders allocate resources; (4) deliberate role modeling, teaching, and coaching; (5) how leaders allocate rewards and status; and (6) how leaders recruit, select, promote, and excommunicate.¹¹

Remember, every move you make confirms the agency’s values—and your staff is watching you carefully: how you answer the phone, the clothes you wear, the language you use, how you treat staff, the board, clients. As Schein warns, “It is not necessary for newcomers to attend special training or indoctrination sessions to learn important cultural assumptions. They become quite evident through the daily behavior of leaders.”¹²

Dear Dr. Conflict,
In our area, there is a coalition of service providers who have worked together for decades. Recently, a new ED came into one of our member agencies and has wreaked havoc by spreading untrue rumors about

our coalition board members, misrepresenting her agency’s services and capacities, and calling employers of board members to malign them, among other quite pathological actions.

She responds to no attempts at peaceful discussion of these matters. When some of us went to the board president of that agency, unsurprisingly she wanted nothing to do with us—citing that she wasn’t responsible for what she didn’t know about nor wanted to know.

It’s a small community and we are very concerned, mostly because of the important nature of the agency. It’s a thirty-year-old domestic violence shelter and the only one within a hundred miles of anywhere—but no one in the coalition will refer anyone to it. So, not only is she making us crazy but, worse, people are not getting the help they need and important partnerships have been compromised. It’s awful.

Horrified

Dear Horrified,

In the old days, you’d solve this problem with the proverbial concrete shoes, and that’s exactly what Dr. Conflict advises you to do now—metaphorically, of course.

Get your coalition members together sans the ED. Map each member’s available political power. Does anyone know the CEOs of the biggest companies in town, city council members or mayor, other influencers and funders, their spouses or significant others? Even better, are any of these power brokers on the ED’s board or know her board president?

In sum, you are going to build an alliance of very powerful people to get your agenda implemented to reform or remove the offending ED. Pick the three or four most powerful and ask them to join you and a few other coalition executives for a frank conversation. Together, form a strategy to fix the problem. Then, turn up the heat. Politics aren’t always

pretty but they can be effective, and they are necessary on occasions like yours.

NOTES

1. Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 4th ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 18.
2. Kim S. Cameron and Robert E. Quinn, *Diagnosing and Changing Organizational Culture: Based on the Competing Values Framework*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 19.
3. Gerald W. Driskill and Angela Laird Brenton, *Organizational Culture in Action: A Cultural Analysis Workbook* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2011), 5.
4. John P. Kotter and James L. Heskett, *Corporate Culture and Performance* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 4.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 24.
7. Timothy N. Nolan, Leonard D. Goodstein, and Jeanette Goodstein, *Applied Strategic Planning: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons, 2008), 44.
8. Cameron and Quinn, *Diagnosing and Changing Organizational Culture*, 19.
9. *Ibid.*, 51.
10. *Ibid.*, 160.
11. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 236.
12. *Ibid.*, 250.

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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