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Dr. Conflict: About That %\$@# Troublemaking Board Member...

By MARK LIGHT | September 29, 2015



(<http://nonprofitquarterly.org/files/2015/03/drconflict.jpg>)

Editors' note: This article is from NPQ's fall 2015 edition, "Making Things Work: Considerations in Nonprofit Strategy."

Dear Dr. Conflict:

We have a former board member who left the board feeling that he had "lost" some kind of fight. Ours was not the only board that he left in this way—in fact, he told me about epic battles he had fought on this or that other board where people did not see the light (according to him). He was always the hero in these stories—the bringer of truth; the others were usually described as being motivated by self-interest of some kind. And, actually, he is very smart, but he is also a fire starter, and sometimes in ways that are hard to trace.

So here is my situation. This guy is quite connected vis-à-vis state agencies, and I believe, though I cannot say for certain, that he is having a negative effect on our funders. I get the sense that our relationship with some of the agencies with which we have major contracts has become less robust. Conversations are less open. It is confusing, but I think I do see a pattern.

How do I take such a thing on? What is the best way to proceed?

—Need a New Friend

Dear Need a New Friend,

You don't just need a new friend—you need a posse. Dr. Conflict has seen people like your former board member many times before, but it's not all his fault that he's such a pain. It's yours, too. Surely you knew about his epic battles before you recruited him? And if you didn't, why not? What were you thinking, bringing this guy onto the board?

Some readers may say Dr. Conflict is talking to the wrong person. They believe the board alone is responsible for recruiting its members. But Dr. C sides with Robert Herman's concept of executive centrality, wherein, "since chief executives are going to be responsible and since they accept responsibility for mission accomplishment and public stewardship, they should work to see that boards fulfill their legal, organizational, and public roles."¹ So Dr. Conflict holds you accountable for the mess you're in.

Here are Dr. Conflict's recommendations: (1) make sure that this sort of sloppy recruitment doesn't happen again, and (2) deal with the renegade ex-board member by counterbalancing his message through your own robust advocacy effort.

First, with respect to board recruitment (and talent acquisition in general), you're in good company when it comes to recruiting: only one in five nonprofit chief executives "strongly agree that they have the right board members to effectively oversee and govern their organization."² The best way to deal with this is recruiting better—or, as the saying goes, "Hire hard—manage easy." Here are Dr. Conflict's rules of thumb:

- Begin with defining the job of the board and board member (these are different), including the mission for each job, expected outcomes and behaviors, and the competencies necessary to succeed.
- As often as possible, engage prospective board members in time-limited committee work before inviting them to the board. Why would you want a stranger on your central decision-making body anyway? This allows you to get a gander at his or her style. Does he or she divide to conquer? Mutter maliciously while others are talking? At the very least, use the referral rule for recruiting, which is that you (or someone you trust) already know the person you're going to recruit.
- Interview using a structured approach (every candidate gets the same interview), behavioral questions (tell us about a time in the past when you did such and such), and a panel of three or four people conducting the interviews (use your governance committee)—and play to the strengths of the prospective board member. That's because people, including board members, do not magically develop hard-wired competencies like personally asking others to give.
- Orient long. It can take a year or even longer for a new board member to rise to the top of the learning curve. Think about assigning another board member to be a buddy to the new recruit. Remember that newbies often don't know what they don't know, and you need to stay close and supportive.

Second, you mention that this former board member may be working against the agency's interest. If true, this would be unfortunate, but there isn't much you can do about it given that he is no longer on the board.

The board, of course, should be ambassadors for your cause. That's because advocacy is very important—especially for agencies tied into government funding. Anne Wallestad, president and CEO of BoardSource, says that "advocacy is too important to the success of our missions to be considered something 'extra' or 'nice to do.' It's absolutely essential to the work of our organizations and our ability to fulfill our missions and serve our communities."³

You can see the direction that Dr. Conflict is taking here. Although he has long promoted three essential board duties (decide direction, delegate effectively, and determine results, including financial and performance), the good doctor is starting to think that driving advocacy should be board duty number four.

And Dr. Conflict is now starting to think that advocacy might merit its very own standing committee of the board. Dr. C is no fan of lots of committees, and neither is the field, with the number of committees dropping from about seven on average in the '90s to about five today.⁴ But that advocacy piece is a big issue these days, with ever-growing pressure on federal, state, and local budgets. A new

collaboration called Stand for Your Mission “seeks to unleash the full potential of nonprofits to advance their missions by engaging board leaders more directly in the advocacy work of their organizations.” It recommends that nonprofit leaders take the following actions:

- Engage the board in a conversation about advocacy.
- Educate the board about it.
- Identify gaps in your advocacy network.
- Join groups that stay current on these matters and engage when the time is right.⁵

In the process of engaging your board to do the good work of advocacy, you will upgrade your recruitment tools with an added job of advancing your agency’s agenda. That, in turn, will mitigate the possible damage of your ex-board member. That’s a win-win for sure.

Notes

1. Robert D. Herman, “Executive Leadership,” in *The Jossey-Bass Handbook of Nonprofit Leadership and Management*, 3rd ed., ed. David O. Renz (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 161.
2. BoardSource, *Leading with Intent: A National Index of Nonprofit Board Practices* (<http://leadingwithintent.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/LWI-Report-2.pdf>) (Washington, DC: BoardSource, 2015), 13.
3. Anne Wallestad, “Why Board Engagement in Advocacy Is Essential (<http://nonprofitquarterly.org/2015/07/15/why-board-engagement-in-advocacy-is-essential/>),” *Nonprofit Quarterly*, July 15, 2015.
4. Mark Light, *The Strategic Board: The Step-by-Step Guide to High-Impact Governance* (New York: Wiley, 2001).
5. Stand for Your Mission (campaign), *The Power of Board Advocacy: A Discussion Guide for Boards* (<http://standforyourmission.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Discussion-Guide.pdf>) (Washington, DC: BoardSource et al, 2015), 7.

Dr. Conflict is the pen name of Mark Light, MBA, PhD. In addition to his work with First Light Group (<http://www.firstlightgroup.com/>), Light is senior professional lecturer 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 for Nonprofits* (<http://www.wiley.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-0471758248.html>)—in 2011.

Got Conflict? Write to Dr. Conflict at feedback@npqmag.org if your organization’s conflict needs resolution.