

Organizational Conflict

Conflict within a nonprofit organization can be scary. At their best, nonprofits put into collective practice the personal passions and beliefs of their members. This may intensify a conflict or, conversely, cause it to be buried in the name of surface unity. Either way, intractable conflict can cause loss of funding or of leadership, or it may destabilize the system in any number of other ways. People within the organization know this and may react with fear, choosing sides or assigning blame.

For the brave leaders of a nonprofit, what does it mean to handle conflict well? To answer this question, we need first to distinguish between everyday, or discrete, conflict and noxious conflict.

DISCRETE CONFLICT

Most conflicts are minor and can be handled relatively easily. Managers, staff and even board members can help each party understand the other's point of view or help them agree to disagree. This kind of simple tinkering is a constant requirement of managers.

Suppose the development director and a program director have an argument when they're on deadline for a grant proposal. The agency's executive director gets complaints from each about the other. After the grant is safely in, the director might make a point of thanking them for working as a team to get the grant out. In individual supervision sessions, she could talk about the conflict, reviewing each person's responsibility for what happened and being clear about behavioral changes she expects. She could also take time in a staff meeting to publicly acknowledge the courage it took for both parties to make the situation work.

At this point, the program director and development director could formally or informally agree to put the matter behind them. They might even make e-mail suggestions to the rest of the program directors about how to avoid a similar situation. This is good management of a conflict.

NOXIOUS CONFLICT

From time to time, more mean-spirited conflict may emerge with sufficient intensity that it threatens the health of the organization as a whole. In some cases the conflict will extend over many months or even years, finally influencing a significant portion of the organizational culture. This noxious conflict makes work difficult and drains the energy of everyone around it.

The solutions for noxious conflict require changes in the structure and norms of an organization. Noxious conflict indicates that it's time for an agency to question the assumptions that underlie how it does business.

THE LEADER'S ROLE

Think about the carnival game in which gophers pop up and you have to hit as many as possible as quickly as possible, using a mallet. But this is easier said than done, of course. Leaders of organizations are still learning how to perceive and welcome conflict's messages. Here are some helpful hints:

When a conflict emerges, see if you can connect it to others. Trace it back in time. Think about the issues that have surfaced in the conflict. Have they surfaced previously? What is the history of the situation? Have conversations with people about how the situation has evolved. Be willing to give up your own construction of reality in the process. In the meantime, stay in touch with the people directly involved in the conflict.

Overcome the cynicism of others. People in and around the organization might believe that the current state of affairs is the way leadership wants it. Staff might, in fact, think of any questioning as a trick or a waste of their time. People might also fear that they are being asked to air the dirty laundry of others. If you experience ambivalence and silence from people with potential information, start by expressing openness and your own willingness to be proven wrong (which had better be genuine!). Let them know how you are going to move forward—that you truly want their point of view to be included in a whole-system view of the problem.

Face your own and others' fears of irretrievable rupture. If a problem with deep implications surfaces, you might experience some sort of organizational rupture—in other words, a breakdown that portends a loss of staff, board members, managers or funding. As you conceive and implement a re-organization, emotions—and resistance—will be very high. The more you retain those in fear as participants in the conversation, the less powerful such resistance becomes. Also, don't make the mistake of underestimating your own fear. Talk it through with a trusted advisor who is willing to be honest and, if necessary, lovingly harsh with you.

Resist the urge to maintain stability. Many believe that the mark of a well-run organization is in its stability. But the ability to evolve powerfully is just as important. One of the inherent contradictions at the core of organizational life is that we struggle to adapt and evolve at the same time as we struggle mightily to stay the same. This contradiction inherently causes tension. Hold that tension and legitimate it as an energy source for change. This may feel unbearable to those who like to get things in order as quickly as possible. Remember that good management in a developing organization (which we all are) requires leaders who can maintain a balance between the chaos of not knowing and the orderliness of knowing.

IN CLOSING

When organizations begin to fail or when they have failed repeatedly, they start to send out showy flares. Some of this will materialize as conflict.

Leaders can help their organizations uncover the problems beneath this conflict, or they can retard and obfuscate the process. When leaders get in the way of the process, sometimes it's because they believe that they alone are responsible for solving the problem. That's not the case. Leaders are responsible for keeping their organizations relevant and effective. One way to do that is to bravely undertake holistic inquiry into the true origins of noxious organizational conflicts.