Managing Board Conflict

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Participating as a member of a board of directors of a voluntary organization is one of the most important ways we can be active in a democracy. Indeed, many people feel that democracy is about active citizenship and that voting on who should represent us in government is only part of what is required of us.

Volunteer boards offer an intimate experience for participating in public life. They call upon our intellect, our deepest beliefs and our skills. Strengthening an inner-city neighbourhood, preserving the natural environment, promoting children's sports, and helping people in need is all important work. It depends on discussion, debate and ultimately collective action.

Wherever people with strong convictions work together to make a difference, there will be conflict. Individual voices have to give way to the voice of the group.

Conflict is competition between and among individuals. It can be constructive and stimulating. It promotes change and adaptation. Conflict, managed well, can promote awareness of self and others. It can even strengthen relationships and heighten morale.
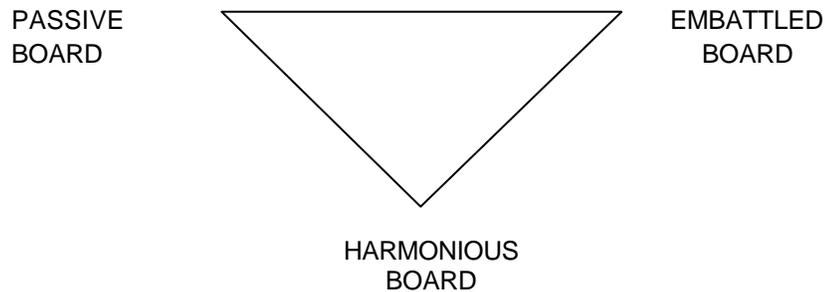
Conflict can be destructive too, and it is its ability to damage individuals and relationships that too often confronts and confounds us. Community organizations and their boards of directors can be fertile ground for conflict because they tend to:

- Be diverse in their membership

- Involve passionate people.

- Struggle with being unified in their organizational mission and goals in the face of many demands

- Be an expression of alternative democratic structures and processes: non-authoritarian, non-hierarchical and inclusive.

- Involve shared leadership with key roles being played by the board and the Executive Director.

- Operate in a dynamic, frequently adversarial, political environment

Your Board's Conflict Handling Culture

A board of directors will, at any point in its history, be located somewhere on a "spectrum" of managing conflict, a spectrum that depicts the extremes and the spaces between them. One way of describing this is indicated below:

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PASSIVE                                              EMBATTLED
BOARD                                                BOARD




                        HARMONIOUS
                          BOARD
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The Passive Board

In the above model, the *passive board* is the board that is going through the motions of governance. Directors see themselves as advisors and operate as a rubber stamp in approving the decisions of those few who are really in charge. The passive board is a group content with the status quo, complacent, comfortable being led by an influential person (perhaps the founder, Chair of Board or the Executive Director). The passive board is one that may be characterized by poor attendance, little membership turnover, very few vocal persons. The passive board is one that takes as 'given' to them, both the ends and means of the organization. When a board's orientation to the world is passive, the governance work of the organization will be done by staff.

The Embattled Board

At another extreme is the *embattled board*. This is the board so involved in power plays and direct and/or behind the scenes politics that it has no time to provide leadership. It is likely a board that regards the governance role as an important one, but the directors and even staff are likely at odds over ends, means and values. If it is a representative board, conflict may arise over how the resources or benefits are divided amongst various constituencies. An embattled board may be divided into factions, some of whom will be involved in secret meetings. Also, it is a board where the differences between its members will spill out from broad meetings to draw staff members and maybe even clients into the fray.

Embattled boards are often those subject to pressures from outside the organization that serve to accentuate the conflict rather than bringing people together in common cause.

The Harmonious Board

The ideal is the *harmonious board*, the board where different voices blend to create a beautiful sound. It is a board that has assumed ownership over the ends of the organization, although not necessarily the means. The board sees itself as a team with each person making a unique

contribution. It is a board prepared to take on new challenges and risks. The board takes a lot of responsibility for managing itself; new members are welcomed, encouraged and supported.

Most boards will find themselves in various places in this spectrum throughout the life of their organization. Although the "harmonious board" might be the ideal and the passive board and embattled board are to be avoided, depending on the circumstances and people involved, other locations in the spectrum might be the right place to be.

Conflict's Many Guises

Where conflict exists, it will tend to manifest itself in different ways.

Direct Conflict

Sometimes our disagreements are out in the open, conflict is up-front, different points of view are "on the table." People are arguing, taking stands, trying to persuade one another, or agreeing to disagree. The mood may be one of anger, frustration or excitement. People may be behaving respectively towards one another, or the debate may involve personal attacks, name calling or shouting.

Confronting differences openly has the potential for the most positive outcomes.

Subtle or Silent Conflict

Conflict can often be subtle; it can exist more in what is not said than what is said. Conflict frequently goes unacknowledged by one or more of the parties and unnoticed or avoided by others. Subtle conflict often occurs where a board is dominated by one person or a small group. It can manifest itself in withdrawal, silence, manipulation, poor attendance and resignation.

Circular Conflict

Circular conflict involves a continual and often escalating range of both deliberate and unconscious actions by individuals that frustrate the ability of the board as a whole to get to the heart of a problem. Boards that are divided into factions can find themselves operating in a circular mode of conflict. In Keeping The Peace (2000), Marion Peters Angelica describes this as "spiraling conflict" and suggests that it often takes someone new to the situation to see it.

Violent Conflict

Violence, whether physical or psychological, can be present in community organizations, as it can in other aspects of life. Violence or threats of violence ought to be taken very seriously by boards of directors. Consideration should be given to involving the police.

Behind the Conflict

We are often very quick to explain our differences as "personality conflicts", but most conflicts are more complex than differences in personal style or types. One of the secrets to managing conflict is to understand its various sources.

Christopher Moore has identified five sources or kinds of conflict and suggests that in most difficult situations more than one is involved. Understanding these sources can help us in knowing what interventions we can make to prevent the conflict from being destructive.

Typical Sources of Conflict
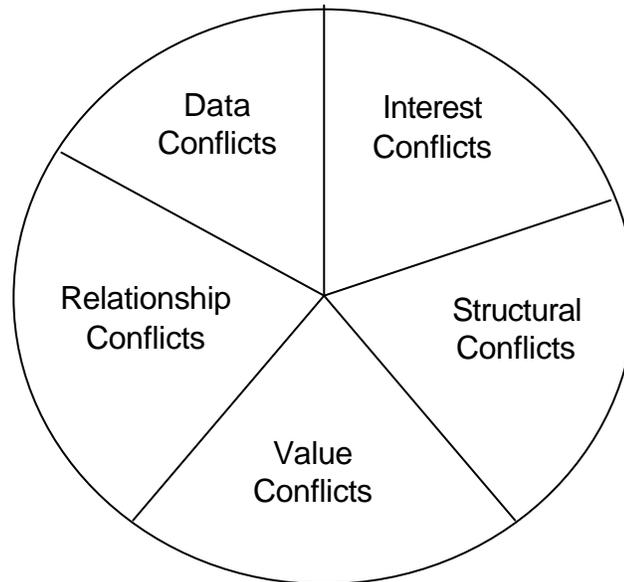
Relationship Conflicts

These are conflicts that involve poor interpersonal communication practices or skills. People tend not to communicate well when strong emotions are involved. People become defensive and allow assumptions and stereotypes to take over. This might be the source where "personality" really enters into the conflict equation.

Data Conflicts

These are conflicts caused by lack of information, misinformation, different views of what information is important, and different interpretations of the available data.

Interest Conflicts

Interest conflicts are about what people really care about, the underlying substantive needs that each person has or sees as critical to their well-being or the well-being of those being served. They arise because of a perception that different interests are in competition with one another, or that one has to "trade off" what one believes is important in order to maintain a friendly relationship.

The "win-win" model of negotiation born out of the work of Roger Fisher and others at Harvard University, suggests that in conflict situations we should take account of common interests, complimentary interests and competing interests, and that we can be assertive about what we need and, at the same time, show genuine concern about what others need.

Structural Conflicts:

Structural conflicts are typically struggles over power or authority; that is, they are about unequal control, ownership or distribution of resources. They are often about who gets to decide or whether the process used to decide is fair, rather than what the outcome will be. Representative boards can be quite susceptible to structural conflicts if directors understand their role to be one of fighting to protect the interests of their constituents.

Value Conflicts

Value conflicts are about our different ways of seeing the world; ideology in the broadest sense. They can arise when critical decisions are being made that go to the heart of the organization. When people discover that there are differences at the level of core values, there are really only two ways of resolving the conflict: tolerate the differences or leave.

The Four Arenas of Board Conflict

For boards of directors of community organizations, there are typically four arenas in which conflict manifests itself.

1. Conflict among board members

Conflict on the board itself arises as a result of differences between individual directors or factions of directors. Camaraderie and friendship is often important for volunteer directors and if the board is not fun at some level, in the face of significant conflict, board members may drift away or resign.

Frequently the chair of the board is the source of the conflict, often by virtue of "running the show" or dominating board discussions, or else he/she is guilty of doing nothing to facilitate resolution.

Marion Peters Angelica points out that the chair and chief executive (Executive Director) must play a role in resolving board conflict but that the latter is in a very awkward position to do so without appearing to take sides or be manipulating the situation. Beyond providing factual information or providing process advice, the Executive Director is wise to let the board chair, or other board members take responsibility for resolving the conflict.

2. Conflict between Board and Staff

Conflict between the board and staff, especially between the board and the Executive Director is common. Often it is a conflict of a structural nature: the boundaries of each others roles and responsibilities, where power is shared.

3. Conflict among Staff Members

Boards frequently get drawn into conflicts among staff or volunteers. While the Board might take a role as a result of their own initiative, more often than not the Board will find themselves

involved because an individual director or a staff person has done an "end run" around the Executive Director.

In situations where a conflict is between a staff person and the Executive Director, the board may need to get involved either to mediate or arbitrate. Boards are increasingly concerned about the legal and/or reputation threats a conflict may have on the organization.

Where there is an Executive Director and the conflict is between other staff (or between volunteers), a board would be wise to stay clear, especially if it wants to be seen as affirming the ED's authority and responsibility.

Boards get drawn into staff conflicts because they are often seen as the real authority. A board with a tendency to micro-manage will be drawn into more staff conflicts than a board that sees its role as an arbitrator of last resort. Boards can make staff conflict situations worse, especially when individual directors, or even the chair, take it upon themselves to intervene.

4. Conflict between the organization and its members or stakeholders

Sometimes the legitimacy of the board and staff will be challenged by the members or groups that are part of the organization's constituency. Factions amongst the membership can arise whenever a few people become unhappy with how things are being run and believe they or others can do a better job. Directors who show disregard for the organization's by-laws or constitution open themselves up to an uprising. In such a situation a board is ripe for a "coup", often involving a raucous Annual General Meeting. Organizations with representative boards are susceptible to these kinds of conflicts because the membership is often already somewhat organized.

How to Manage Better With Conflict

Unfortunately the media and entertainment industry provide us few examples of well managed conflict. However, there are ways to channel our inevitable differences into constructive action. Here are some ideas, not in any particular order, for non–profit organizations that want to manage conflict more effectively.

1. Clarify roles and responsibilities

Boards must strive to clarify the roles and responsibilities of individual directors and officers (especially the chairperson) and the board's role in relation to staff. An annual board orientation session is a logical place for such a discussion. Job descriptions outlining duties and responsibilities are seldom adequate for clarifying roles, especially where board and staff responsibilities overlap such as in determining and working on strategic objectives.

2. Seek or develop a skilled board chairperson

An effective board chair is critical to managing conflict. Such effectiveness comes from clarity about the chair's role, personal integrity, an understanding of the importance of process and the liberal use of a few proven facilitation techniques.

3. Encourage job evaluation

Formal evaluation processes for the board, executive director and staff members are important mechanisms for direct communication and action that can improve working relationships. Boards should evaluate themselves (with the Executive Director having an opportunity to provide his/her own assessment of the relationship) and should regularly evaluate the Executive Director according to pre-determined criteria. Regular evaluation of staff, by the executive director, if constructively handled, will help avoid staff conflicts.

4. Implement a grievance procedure

Whether unionized or not, voluntary organizations that employ staff or regularly utilize volunteers should have a written grievance or complaint procedure that is known to everyone. Such a procedure will outline the steps and decision makers involved in resolving a dispute. Normally such a procedure will include both informal (verbal) and formal (written) steps and time frames. In most cases such a procedure will designate the Board of Directors as the final decision-maker.

5. Establish a code of conduct for directors

Non-profit organizations ought to have a written code of conduct for directors that set some standards and rules for their relationship with one another, with the Executive Director and with staff. A code of conduct ought to give direction on issues such as confidentiality, conflicts of interests, interactions with staff and speaking with "one voice".

6. Deal with conflict openly when it arises

As uncomfortable as it often is, and as much as we hope that it will go away if we ignore it, it is important to acknowledge conflict directly when it occurs. Boards need to talk about what to do when they have differences. What is necessary for the board room to be a safe place to raise difficult issues?

7. Discuss good interpersonal communications practices

Boards should make time, possibly at orientation, to reflect on, research and discuss good communication practices. On an individual level this includes balancing "inquiry" and "advocacy", checking our assumptions, being aware of own filters and separating impact from intent. Directors can be more effective if each person put into practice the principle that they should '**seek first to understand, and then to be understood**."

Starting a "difficult conversation" by describing what happened rather than our interpretation of what happened can help prevent people from becoming defensive.

8. Frame conflict as a exercise in "win-win" negotiation

It can often be helpful when there are different views on what should happen, to discuss the resolution of a conflict as a negotiation. In this frame, people can be asked to set their positions aside, assert their views, seek to understand those of others, work with underlying interests (common and different), and look for solutions that meet everyone's interests.

9. Celebrate agreements and new understandings

Both boards and staff can do more to acknowledge the hard work that is involved in expressing and working through important issues. We can all show genuine appreciation for openness and risk-taking, "Pats on the back" are often welcome. A bottle of champagne, a case of beer or a team dinner can be useful ways of drawing attention to success in managing conflict.

10. Look to gender and cultural differences as a way out of a mess.

It is well known that men and women, and people of different cultures, bring different perspectives and skills to managing conflict. If a conflict suffers from cultural intransigence, boards should look inward or outward for some alternative approaches.

11. Seek outside help early

A third party is often very valuable in helping to resolving conflict. This can be a professional or a trusted friend outside of the organization. The integrity and skills of the person should always take precedence over their position; even a representative of a funder, if they are the right person, could facilitate a resolution.

The board should be clear if it wants the resolution mediated with the help of a facilitator (a negotiated resolution) or someone else to hear the arguments on all sides and decides (an arbitrated settlement).

Note on the Author

E. Grant MacDonald is Associate Professor (Continuing Education) at Dalhousie University where he is the Director of the Non-Profit Sector Leadership Program and Associate Director of the Negotiation and Conflict Management Program. His primary areas of teaching, research and practice are non-profit board governance, organizational leadership, negotiation and mediation.

Resources

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