



Dr. Conflict

by Mark Light, MBA, PhD

If as a new hire as second in charge you experience barriers to fulfilling your role, clarify your job, reach out to your staff, and engage your CEO, board chair, and other stakeholders. Then, craft a worthy vision for your organization that will unite the organization under a common banner.

DEAR DR. CONFLICT,
I am new to a small, county-focused nonprofit. There are thirteen employees besides me. I was hired as second in charge by an organization that has only ever had one internal leader (and there is an overly involved board chair, to boot).

My goals are to relieve the CEO of the daily minutia, particularly personnel issues, so that he can focus on growing the organization and special projects. My problem comes from two angles: First, while the CEO had agreed to the position, was in on the hiring process, and has visibly tried to support my role, he has struggled with letting go of the day to day. While I understand the difficulty of letting go after being responsible for so long, it often hampers my abilities to implement process and make needed changes, and can lead to undermining my abilities and authority. I have tried to have conversations, albeit gently, with him about this. He does not react poorly during these conversations but I do not think that he really feels he is doing anything wrong.

This has some tie-in to my second dilemma: integration with the staff. I am no stranger to having to integrate into a new culture, gain trust of

employees and peers, and learn the new ways. But I have never had such a difficult time before. This time, I do have a higher position than previous jobs, and I know that some of the pushback is because I am the new guy who was given power over them. They are concerned about what I may change, and resentful that I make more money.

The fact that the CEO sometimes seems to undermine my authority doesn't help matters. I have tried many different approaches with the group, but they just won't open up. They are the quietest group I have ever dealt with. Getting input and feedback is excruciating. I am aware that there is a rumor/complaint mill that goes on about me and my activities and duties. Again, things take time, but I feel as though I am the only one trying, and I could use a ray of sunshine cracking through. Sometimes I question my decision in taking the position.

Caught in the Middle

Dear Caught in the Middle,
Talk about a rock and a hard place! On one side is a long-standing CEO (call him a founder due to his long tenure) and an overly involved board chair (what a pain that can be, almost always); on the other side is the quietest group ever of subordinate staff biting their nails as they gossip

and wait for the shoes to drop. And right in the middle is you, the first day-to-day go-to person in the history of the agency. What is this—*Game of Thrones: The Nonprofit Sequel*?

The first thing for you to do is to buck up for the work ahead. No more questioning your decision to take the job. Put away your self-doubts and that box of tissues. You have a tough road to travel, so get centered and line up your personal support for the journey ahead—be it meditation, libations, or a personal coach.

Now it's time to clarify your job—the low-hanging fruit of fixing your troubles. Are you the second in charge or the director of daily minutia and personnel issues? You write that the CEO sometimes seems to undermine your authority, but why should he bother when you're so much better at it? A second-in-command connotes a chief operating officer (COO); daily minutia describes an executive assistant. Which are you? You'll find out when you create what Geoff Smart and Randy Street call a "scorecard," with its mission that "describes why a role exists . . . outcomes that a person must accomplish [and] the behaviors that someone must demonstrate to achieve the outcomes."¹ Put your scorecard together with a

revised organizational chart, discuss it with the CEO and that overly involved board chair, and get clear on it. Be rock solid about this.

Dr. Conflict is assuming that you are the COO, which *Game of Thrones* calls the Hand of the King, “second only to the King in authority and responsibility . . . the King’s closest advisor, appointed and authorized to make decisions in the King’s name.”² But if you’re the minister of minutia instead, then you have a difficult decision to make. Being a knight is not so bad; it’s better than being a squire.

Now, dear COO, you must *reach out to your staff*. Dr. Conflict knows they’re concerned about what you’re going to change, which is surely valid; they deserve to know and also have some level of participation in the outcomes. Dr. Conflict knows, too, that they are bitter about your compensation and there’s a “rumor/complaint mill that goes on” about you. So what? This goes with the C-level turf. And what Dr. Conflict once wrote about boards probably applies here, too: “More likely they are reverting to their primate heritage and simply stirring the pot of conflict as a way to deal with the boredom.”³ Grow a thicker skin.

Sit down with each of your staff members one on one and discuss the new organizational chart and his or her position. They won’t be so quiet once you start asking well-intentioned questions that have real purpose. Have a robust discussion, a give-and-take, about your expectations. Get to know your staff personally, their aspirations for themselves and the organization, who they are, their likes and dislikes. If you listen with sincerity and openness, you’ll see a clearing of the clouds. After all, you know your job now and your staff will know theirs.

Speaking of relationships, *don’t forget your CEO*. You do know that the position you now hold was not his idea, don’t you?

It’s right there between the lines in “he had agreed to the position.” This can’t be an easy time for him, and part of your role must be to help him with letting go. Ironically, one of the best things you can do is to involve him in your thinking. Go to him with your observations and use him as a sounding board that celebrates his long contribution to the agency. Remember that old adage that “as he is, you will be.” Pay it forward.

You must also *engage your board chair and other stakeholders* of influence who very likely advocated for your position as part of succession planning. Seek them out one by one to ask their counsel; they will become good friends to you and generous allies later in your work.

Finally, gather all of your constituents together to *craft a worthy vision* for your organization that will bring everyone together under a common banner. As Burt Nanus so eloquently put it, “Vision always deals with the future. Indeed, vision is where tomorrow begins.”⁴

NOTES

1. Geoff Smart and Randy Street, *Who: The A Method for Hiring* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2008), 44.
2. “Hand of the King,” *Game of Thrones Wiki*, accessed February 27, 2015, gameofthrones.wikia.com/wiki/Hand_of_the_King.
3. Mark Light, “Eye-Rolling, Chair-Shifting, Last-Nerve Boards—and What to Do about Them,” *Nonprofit Quarterly*, October 4, 2012, nonprofitquarterly.org/management/21119-eye-rolling-chair-shifting-last-nerve-boards-and-what-to-do-about-it.html.
4. Burt Nanus, *Visionary Leadership: Creating a Compelling Sense of Direction for Your Organization* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1992), 8–9.

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