

Managing Conflict: A Guide for Volunteer Boards

By E. Grant MacDonald



Participating as a member of a board of directors of a non-profit or voluntary organization is one of the most important roles we can play in a democracy. Indeed, many people feel that a vibrant democracy requires engaged citizenship; that electing government representatives and obeying the law, as important as these are, is not enough to make our communities work. Volunteer boards offer an intimate experience for participating in public life. They call upon our intellect and our hearts as well as our skills.

People bring to any important conversation a wide range of experiences and perspectives. Wherever individuals with strong convictions work together there will be differences; how we engage and manage those differences determines whether such conflict will get in the way of our collective wisdom, or, enable it to emerge.

Conflict can be constructive. Managed well it promotes change and adaptation, awareness of self and others. It can even strengthen relationships and heighten morale. Managed poorly however, conflict can also be destructive. Its ability to hurt individuals and damage relationships is what affects us most because, despite our effort to tell ourselves not to, we take it personally.

Conflict, whether out in the open or submerged, is one of the leading reasons for board member and executive director resignations. Community organizations and their boards of directors can be fertile ground for conflict because they tend to be:

- Diverse in their membership
- Involve passionate, caring people
- Struggle with being unified and focused in terms of mission and goals in the face of many important demands
- Be an expression of alternative democratic structures and processes: non-authoritarian, non-hierarchical and inclusive.
- Require shared leadership by a volunteer board and an executive director.
- Operate in a dynamic, frequently adversarial, political context

What lies behind most conflict?

While we are often quick to attribute board strife to “a conflict of personalities”, most of the differences that we experience are more complex than our individual styles or traits.

Friction can certainly result from unhelpful “behaviour” in terms of interpersonal communication. But conflicts can also result from lack of information, different views of what information is important, or even varying interpretations of available information. Often, conflict is rooted too in different needs or interests and the perception that all the choices facing the organization are in competition with one another. Structural conflicts.

a struggle over power or authority, are also common. Value conflicts, the most difficult to resolve, result from different ways of understanding the world; our ideals in the broadest sense.

The Emotional Dimension of Conflict

Emotions are always present where issues and relationships are at stake. The idea that we can “leave them outside” the meeting, is false. It is the emotional dimension of conflict that is the most difficult factor for most of us to deal. In Resolving Conflicts at Work, Kenneth Cloke and Joan Goldsmith point out that:

Our emotions can be constructive or destructive, pleasurable or painful, positive or negative. They can distort or clarify our communication, escalate or de-escalate our conflicts, encourage us to act collaboratively or prevent us from doing so. They can blind us or allow us to see others as they truly are. They can leave us exhausted or fulfilled. (p.79)

Conflict is not a battle between the rational and irrational. The presence of strong emotions means that people care; that the issues and the relationships, often both, are close to people’s hearts. For every negative emotion there is a positive one; what we are against reminds us what we are for. Cloke and Goldsmith remind us:

When we withdraw from our emotions, we end up learning little or nothing about what gave rise to them, or how to experience them fully, or how to respond to them skillfully, or how to recognize what lies underneath them. When we relax, we let go of our fear of expressing emotions, and engage them, we release ourselves from their grip and increase our clarity, creativity, opportunities for learning, and chances for resolution, transformation and healing. (p.81)

Our emotions inevitably affect important conversations, they seep into our language, or worse, they explode into it. Managing the emotional dimension of conflict has little to do with discussing our feelings and everything to do with acknowledging what is important. Acknowledgement of our feelings – our hopes and fears, and an invitation to others to acknowledge theirs, can only humanize the conversation.

Four Areas of Conflict

1. Conflict among board members

Conflict on the board can arise from differences between or among individual directors or factions of directors. The chair of the board can be a contributing factor when board members are fighting. Indeed the chairperson may be source of the conflict by virtue of “running the show” or dominating board discussions. He/she may also be the problem because there is no leadership when others are at odds.

The chair and executive director can both play a role in resolving board conflict, but the latter is in a very awkward position to act 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 chair play the lead role.

2. Conflict between board and executive director

Differences between the board and the executive director are probably the most common area of conflict in non-profit organizations. Often these differences will be structural in nature, that is, they have to do with the boundaries of each other’s roles and responsibilities.

Trust is a huge factor in the board-executive director relationship. The more involved a board is in overseeing operational decisions, even when such oversight is invited by the executive director, the less trust will

characterize this relationship. In contrast, the more the board is involved in strategic decisions, the greater will be the trust.

3. Conflict among staff members

Boards frequently get drawn into conflicts among staff or volunteers. Staff conflicts, and conflicts between a staff member and the executive director, are not uncommon and boards should not be automatically regard them as an indication of a deficiency in the executive director's management skills.

Ideally a board will hear about such situations first from the executive director. Sometimes however, someone with a grievance will choose to do an "end run" around the executive director and appeal directly to the board. The board may need to get involved either to mediate or arbitrate such disputes especially in situations where no policy has been set. Where the conflict is between other staff members, or between volunteers, a board would be wise to stay clear, especially if it wants to affirm the executive director's authority and accountability.

4. Conflict between the organization and its members and stakeholders.

Sometimes the legitimacy of the board can itself 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.

A Strategy for Confronting Conflict

When the board or the organization as a whole is disabled by a conflict it needs to face it head on. Conflicts should not be left to simmer in the hope they will go away. Leadership by the board chair or the executive director in pushing for a resolution process is required.

In situations where the board chair or and or the executive director are parties in the conflict, an external resource person should be called upon to assist in a mediation role.

Confronting a conflict situation almost always can benefit from face-to-face communication amongst the parties involved, either a series of meetings with individuals and/or a group meeting involving all of the parties. An intervention aimed at resolving the disagreement and repairing a damaged relationship, should:

- Rely on the involvement of a volunteer, staff person or external facilitator who has the respect of everyone to facilitate the process. This could be a board member. Boards should avoid handing the work over to an existing board committee.
- Arrange a special meeting or a series of private meetings, not a board meeting. Regular and official board meetings are not the best place to confront a serious conflict even if all members of the board are involved.
- Avoid secret meetings; the process needs to be transparent. Inform the whole board and the staff that a conflict resolution process has been undertaken, indicated the steps and who is involved and that the outcome will be reported to them.
- Ensure that everyone understands that the process is not one that will result in organizational decisions or commitments although the parties, if an agreement is reached, may make recommendations, to the board.

- Not involve formal minutes or notes of conflict resolution meetings. Ensure that the dialogue is treated as confidential. The outcome, if the parties agree, can be reported. A list of the participants and written statement or recommendation from the group is often useful in terms of moving ahead.

Good Practices in Managing Conflict

1. Pay attention to good interpersonal communications

No amount of written policy statements or role descriptions can substitute for regular attention to good communications practices in board meetings and e-mail communication. Boards and staff groups need to have a conversation about such practices on a regular basis. Meeting “ground rules” can help as can a prohibition against using e-mail as a means of advocating, or enlisting support for, particular points of view.

Boards should devote some time, at least once a year, perhaps at orientation, to reflect on and discuss good communication practices. On an individual level this includes balancing “inquiry” (asking questions of one another) and “advocacy” (stating our own viewpoint), being aware of our assumptions, and being more intentional in listening to one another. Directors can be more effective if each person puts into practice the principle that one should ‘seek first to understand, and then to be understood.’

2. Operate with a strategic plan

The existence of a strategic plan or involvement in a strategic planning process that helps articulate goals, objectives and outcomes can be of great value in reducing the potential for conflict over the meaning of the organizational mission, strategic choices and priorities.

3. 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 can be helpful but are seldom sufficient for clarifying roles, especially where board and staff responsibilities overlap such as in determining and working on strategic objectives.

4. Help develop a skilled 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 proven facilitation techniques. A chair needs the board’s support in assuming an active role in managing the board.

5. Learn about conflict resolution processes

Boards and executive directors can really benefit from some familiarity with negotiation and conflict resolution processes before a conflict arises. Some understanding will help the organization determine the appropriate mechanism for a particular situation, including when outside assistance might be of value. Conflict resolution is regarded as a core skill area for today’s leaders. It is a topic that should be introduced as part of board education and be added to the list of professional development goals for staff members, particularly the executive director.

6. *Establish a code of conduct for directors*

Develop 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 set some rules on issues such as confidentiality, conflicts of interests, lobbying of fellow board members and speaking with “one voice”.

7. *Encourage performance evaluation*

Formal evaluation processes for the board and executive director 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.

8. *Implement a grievance procedure*

Whether unionized or not, voluntary organizations that employ staff or regularly utilize volunteers should have a written internal 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, which is involved and time frames. In most cases such a procedure will designate the Board of Directors as the final decision-maker. A grievance procedure may be a stand-alone policy or part of a broader personnel policy.

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 tough issues. We can all show genuine appreciation for openness and risk-taking. A round of “appreciation” or a celebratory 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 and traditions, bring different perspectives and skills to managing conflict. If a conflict suffers from an ingrained gender or cultural pattern, boards should look for some alternative ways for talking things out. Other approaches can sometimes come from sources that are closer than we might have thought.

Recommended Resources

Angelica, Marion Peters (2000), Keeping the Peace: Resolving Conflict in the Board Room, St. Paul: Amherst H. Wilder Foundation and the National Centre for Non-Profit Boards.

Angelica, Marion Peters (1999), Resolving Conflict in Nonprofit Organizations: A Leaders Guide to Finding Constructive Solutions. St. Paul: Amherst H. Wilder Foundation/fieldstone Alliance.

Cloke, Kenneth and Joan Goldsmith (2000), Resolving Conflicts at Work: A Complete Guide for Everyone on the Job, San Francisco: Jossey Bass/Wiley.

Stone, Douglas, Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen (1999), Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most, New York: Penguin Books.