

Why Conflict on Your Board of Directors is a Good Thing

BOARD OF DIRECTORS **FEATURED** **FUNDRAISING**

by [Spencer Creal](#)

Conflict on your board of directors can be a good thing. Crazy, right?

It is often our natural tendency to avoid conflict at all costs. Even when we know conflict may be necessary to resolve an issue, we choose to stay in our safe, non-confrontational bubbles. We fear that conflict will only lead to fights and petty frustration, so we avoid it altogether. Conflict can be (and often is) detrimental to a group's success, but having such a narrow-minded view of conflict is dangerous. Conflict is the only way to move past disagreements and come up with solutions and compromises. We need conflict, and we need it badly.

Blind agreement is bad—very bad

From a young age, many of us are taught that conflict is an objectively bad thing; that disagreeing with someone is impolite and deconstructive. We need to shake this mentality, especially when making important decisions within our organizations.

If you're familiar with the [Abilene Paradox](#), you know all about the negative consequences of being *too* agreeable. Essentially, the Abilene Paradox posits that many organizations take action in contradiction to what they really want to do out of an inability to manage agreement.

Here's the abridged history of the Abilene Paradox. It's a hot, windy, dusty Texas afternoon, and four relatives are playing dominoes in the comfort of their own home. The father-in-law then suggests that the family take a trip to Abilene, a nearby town about sixty miles away. Everyone agrees without much resistance, and the family goes out in the miserably hot Texas air, into a car with no air conditioning, and all the way to Abilene for lunch. When they arrive back home, it becomes evident that nobody had wanted to go to Abilene in the first place. They were all just trying to appease each other, so they avoided disagreement. And so the Abilene Paradox was born.

You can imagine how this paradox would be detrimental to any group's success—especially a board of directors.

Good conflict vs. Bad conflict

[Solange Charas](#), president of a strategic consulting company, conducted some [research](#) about conflict within Boards of Directors, and found that there are two distinct types of conflict: cognitive conflict and affective conflict. Cognitive conflict, she writes, is “task-oriented, with a focus on how to get things done to achieve optimal results.” Affective conflict, on the other

hand, is “emotionally oriented and focused on personal differences.” As you can probably guess, cognitive conflict is far more valuable in a group setting than affective conflict. In Charas’ study, boards that recognized and addressed affective conflict showed signs of much more efficient governance, while boards that did little to alleviate affective conflict showed poor governing efficiency. Boards with more instances of cognitive conflict showed higher levels of innovation and positivity.

In caveman speak: cognitive conflict good, affective conflict bad.

Why conflict is so important

[Alfred Sloan](#), former CEO of GM and pioneer of organizational thinking, understood the value of conflict. During one of GM’s board meetings, Sloan concluded that all board members were in agreement on an important decision. He then said, “I propose we postpone further discussion of this matter until the next meeting to give ourselves time to develop disagreement, and perhaps gain some understanding of what the decision is all about.” Sloan’s notion of conflict is fundamentally important: without disagreement, board members (or any decision-making body) can’t fully grasp the matter at hand. If you have [board members](#) who embrace, or even encourage cognitive conflict, you can be confident that they’re pushing your organization in the right direction.

[Simone Joyaux](#), founder of Joyaux Associates nonprofit consulting, has been working with nonprofit boards for years, and she, too, understands the value of conflict. “If we don’t disagree about important things, then, good God, we’re just following each other.” She attributes many of issues involving conflict within boards to power dynamics. Historically, boards of directors were pretty homogeneous, consisting almost entirely of affluent males. Today, boards are becoming increasingly diverse, and, because different people bring different experiences, personalities and values to the table, conflict is bound to occur. This conflict is imperative, and it should be cherished rather than avoided.

It’s time to stop cowering in the face of conflict. Disagreement and discussion are the only ways to come up with new, innovative solutions to problems. It may be easy and comfortable to silently nod your head in agreement, but soon enough you’ll be driving down the hot Texas highway with no AC—or something like that.

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