



Dr. Conflict

by Mark Light, MBA, PhD

Remember the saying “You’re either part of the problem or part of the solution”? If you want to bring a concern to your seniors’ attention, come prepared with a fix! But “[t]here is no magic number,” says Dr. Conflict, when it comes to determining optimal span of control. Instead, “the choice must achieve harmony with the situation you have, not the one you dream about.”

DEAR DR. CONFLICT, About a year and a half ago, we moved from two separate fundraising teams (with two supervisors) to one under a single manager. This has been a struggle, because eight of the eleven gift officers are regionally based and they rely heavily on management for guidance. Therefore, although the gift sizes are standardized, management still needs to be heavily involved with cultivation due to our unique volunteer structure.

I’m worried for my team and my management. I’m one of those rare people who love their job, their bosses, their team. I’m concerned that it will be hard to maintain a stabilized state. Throughout the growth and change, upper management has not participated in implementing procedures, and so we do not have any automated processes to make managing eleven direct reports feasible.

I think that my manager should only have a maximum of six to eight direct reports, because the workload is too large a burden for one person. In fact, it’s the largest number of direct reports in our whole division and, I believe, the entire organization.

Am I right about the number of direct reports, and, if I speak up, how do I avoid a massive pushback from the top? Please point me in the right direction!

Control Spanner

Dear Control Spanner,

Starting with your question about six to eight direct reports, Dr. Conflict is sorry to burst your bubble, but there is no magic number. Most executives will say it’s seven, but taking this approach is the top mistake that executives make around this topic.¹ Why? Because situation is everything, and what works for you doesn’t work for someone else.

Though there isn’t a “one best way” for exact size, the trend is for flatter and wider. Using data from Fortune 500 companies, a recent study found that the number of direct reports has doubled during the last two decades, from about five between 1986 and 1990 to about ten between 2004 and 2008.² Granted, your organization is not one of America’s largest companies with the commensurate depth of support staff, but it does suggest that your agency’s shift might have been overdue.

Determining the right span of control

begins with deciding how to manage your staff. You work hard to recruit and hire, orient and develop, and reward and retain your wonderful people, right? Assuming that you believe in “hire hard, manage easy,” how exactly do you want to do this?

Marcus Buckingham uses checkers and chess to frame the answer: “In checkers, all the pieces are uniform and move in the same way; they are interchangeable. . . . In chess, each type of piece moves in a different way, and you can’t play if you don’t know how each piece moves. . . . Great managers know and value the unique abilities and even the eccentricities of their employees.”³ The point is, if you want to be a great chess-playing talent manager, you’ll need more time with each employee, and that translates to a shorter span of control.

Let’s nuance this a bit more with the work of Henry Mintzberg.⁴ The first question he asks about organizational design is, How do people coordinate work? If folks do a lot of talking to each other up close and personal, this takes time, and you’ll need shorter spans of control. This is usually the case with simple structures, in which the boss uses direct supervision,

or “ad hoc” structures, where people come together to mutually solve problems. Think smaller nonprofits or task forces and consultancies.

If you coordinate work through standardization—be it processes (testing for HIV, social service client intake), skills gained before coming to the job (MD, JD, MBA), or where you delegate the ends, not the means (A–Z projects)—you can have much larger spans of control. Think professional bureaucracies like hospitals and higher education, machine bureaucracies like factories and blood banks, or divisional organizations like chapters, franchises, or program- or client-focused groups.

Mintzberg’s second question is about structural elements. If you have detailed policies, formalized job descriptions, and job specialization (you do A, she does B), you are taking a bureaucratic approach that allows for wider spans of control with less supervision.⁵ But if you’re informal about these matters—the opposite of bureaucratic—you are taking an organic approach that requires shorter spans of control and more supervision.

Which is better: up-close or standardized coordination, organic or bureaucratic structure, shorter spans of control or wider ones? There is no right or wrong answer, because the choice must achieve harmony with the situation you have, not the one you dream about.

When it comes to the “situation is everything” of the organization, you must first decide whether it’s dynamic or stable. A dynamic world where things are constantly changing requires quick responses that often generate innovative solutions. A stable world offers the chance to build a finely tuned, high-performing operation—a smooth-running machine, as it were.

Not surprisingly, age and size correlate to the situation, structure, and coordination elements. Younger and smaller agencies flourish in dynamic

environments, use up-close coordination, have organic structure, and use shorter spans of control. These can be very exciting places to work for those who like the challenge (and stress) that comes with constant adaptation.

Older and larger organizations thrive in stable climates, rely on standardization for coordination, have a bureaucratic structure, and use wider spans of control. Unfortunately, bureaucratic structures have a reputation for “dull and repetitive work, alienated employees, obsession with control . . . massive size, and inadaptability.”⁶ But these are the most popular structures, are “indispensable,”⁷ and can improve when management uses job enrichment to give employees the chance to use different skills, increase their autonomy, and help develop their careers.

Dr. Conflict is now ready to answer your question about whether in your situation a “maximum of six to eight direct reports” is correct. From a situation standpoint, fundraising is always dynamic and demands constant adaptation. This requires up-close coordination that takes time to deliver, which is why your regional officers rely heavily on management for guidance. This, in turn, necessitates your organic structure that is low on standardized procedures; every day is different, and you cannot script it in advance. Add it all up, and you should indeed be using shorter spans of control. For once, smaller is better.

Why did your management widen the span of control? Maybe it was to follow the trend. Maybe the board chair runs a big factory and compelled it. Most likely it was to save money. No matter: the wider span of control is penny wise and pound foolish.

What about the “massive pushback from the top”? The *wrong way* to go is to offer up the problem and let them find the solution, which might be to

reduce the span of control by one—you. Better to outline the problem and then provide the solution, which is to make you an assistant manager with a span of control of three people. You did say you were “one of those rare people who love their job, their bosses, their team,” didn’t you? Now prove it and become that great, chess-playing talent manager that you are obviously destined to be.

NOTES

1. Gary L. Neilson and Julie Wulf, “How Many Direct Reports?,” *Harvard Business Review* 90, no. 4 (April 2012): 112–119, hbr.org/2012/04/how-many-direct-reports/ar/1.
2. Ibid.
3. Marcus Buckingham, “What Great Managers Do,” *Harvard Business Review* 83, no. 3 (March 2005): 72, hbr.org/2005/03/what-great-managers-do/ar/1.
4. Henry Mintzberg, “Organization Design: Fashion or Fit?,” *Harvard Business Review* 59, no. 1 (January 1981): 103–116, hbr.org/1981/01/organization-design-fashion-or-fit/ar/1; Mintzberg, *Structure in Fives: Designing Effective Organizations* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1983).
5. Mintzberg classifies span of control as one of the key structural elements.
6. Mintzberg, “Organization Design: Fashion or Fit?,” 109.
7. Ibid.

DR. CONFLICT is the pen name of Mark Light, MBA, PhD. In addition to his work with First Light Group (www.firstlightgroup.com), Light is executive in residence at DePaul University School of Public Service, where he teaches strategic management, human resource management, and ethical leadership. John Wiley & Sons published his most recent book—*Results Now*—in 2011.

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