



Dr. Conflict

by Mark Light

DEAR DR. CONFLICT, I have just had the most upsetting experience, and I am unsure how to resolve it.

Over the years, my organization (partner A) has collaborated with other organizations, and we always try to support and promote our partners. This past summer, I discussed with another agency (partner B) an emerging community problem that we both identified independently. I also recently had a conversation with a foundation officer who had expressed concern about the same issue. I suggested to partner A that we develop a joint proposal, and I called a local funder to ask for a meeting

Meanwhile my friend (partner B) thought another agency (partner C) could add value to the project, so we decided to approach the funder together. The principal in partner C is on partner B's board and had a unique capacity to produce a critical element of the project. I was key in drafting the proposal and spent precious dollars making a special trip to another city to defend it with the two partner agencies. My agency is, by the way, the least well heeled of the organizations involved.

Long story short: the funder decided to fund the other two and completely cut my organization out of the picture. There may be a back story, as suggested to me by partner B, involving someone at the funder not "liking" us. Partner B and partner C made one phone call apiece to check in with me but never approached me otherwise to discuss how to keep the original plan alive or even to tell me that our agency was a useless cog in the plan (though I do not for a minute believe that is the case).

I recently ran into another grant officer who funds all three of us, and he told me about this same project and described it as an interesting collaborative effort that these two organizations had told him about.

I am seeing so much red and feeling so blue, I cannot tell you. I feel like I played by good citizenship rules and got slapped silly anyway. I am having difficulty talking with either of these longtime partners. What should I do? What kind of effed-up behavior is this?

Feeling Blue and Seeing Red

*Dear Feeling Blue and Seeing Red,
What is wrong with the world?
What happened to campfires and*

marshmallows? Does no one eat S'mores and sing "Kumbaya" anymore? This is the nonprofit sector for heaven's sake, not Wall Street!

Let's review what happened here. You—partner A—had an idea about a project that was also interesting to your funder. You teamed up with your friend partner B, who then brought in partner C, who was one of B's board members and added unique capacity to the project. You wrote the grant, went on the out-of-town pitch, but the funder gave the deal to your partners, who are now talking it up to others.

What you brought to the table was sweat equity in recognizing and cultivating the idea with the funder, advancing the collaboration, and writing and selling the project. On the downside, you were the weak link in terms of funding, and there may have been some bad blood with the funder.

You have two conflicts here. The first is with the funder, which cut you out of the picture and may have a prejudice against you. The second is with your two partners, who at best appear to have left things hanging concerning your involvement on the project. At the

worst, they may—repeat may—have been co-conspiring backstabbers who exiled you unceremoniously.

As Dr. Conflict always says, the first step in any conflict is to decide whether to engage or avoid. Even though many consider avoidance a poor choice, it can be very useful, especially when one's safety is at stake. If talking to the funder about why you were cut out of the partnership could damage future funding, you may want to let the matter slide. If going to your partners about this will quash any future collaborations, you may want to chill instead.

If rule one about whether to avoid or engage is about safety, rule two is about stakes in the relationship. For example, you're going to work a lot harder at resolving conflict with your ex-spouse if there are kids involved and you have been married a long time.¹ That's why avoiding your partners seems like a losing proposition; you obviously have stakes in these long-term relationships.

Let's assume that in both cases—with the funder and the partners—that the stakes in the relationship are high and worries about safety are low. Then the only reason to avoid the conflict is because you don't much care about the issue and you don't much care about your partners or funder. Since the tone of your letter suggests otherwise, you need to engage.

Deciding what tack to take—step two—begins with determining whether you have conflicting or common interests with the folks across the table. If you have common interests, you'll want to consider a collaborating or accommodating stance. In the former, you should look for ways to work together, including taking the necessary time—often lots and lots of it—to work through common issues and concerns, the whole shebang including your anger.

In terms of accommodation, you

should choose this approach when you don't have much power to make things happen. Since you are less well heeled, as you so eloquently put it, and aren't on equal footing with your partners and funder, you would engage with the hope of getting something for your trouble after the fact. The water is over the dam, so the question now is how to work together from this point forward. You're giving in graciously, but not giving up.

To be sure, some out there—those hopelessly addicted to Law & Order reruns and Judge Judy—will say that you should lawyer up or at least get on your muscle and make some threats about what you'll do if you don't get what you want. But remember that you don't have a whole lot of muscle right now. You're owed some consideration, but you simply don't have the power to follow through on your threats. Now, if you had told Dr. Conflict that you had no common interests with your partners and funder, that you actually had competing interests, that you didn't much care what happened to them one way or the other, and that you had mucho power, Dr. Conflict might have advised that you get competitive with your partners and crush them like ants.²

Unfortunately, the surest way to obliterate the opportunity for future partnerships is to do some ant crushing. You may be feeling blue and seeing red, but you have to remember that there are two sides to every conflict. No, your partners didn't call you and they certainly owed you that consideration, but they might just ask why you didn't call them. Was your phone broken, e-mail down, car in the shop? And the funder may have a good reason for cutting you out of the loop. The good thing about your letter—and anger—is that you wrote Dr. Conflict instead of having your attorney write your partners and funder. Dr. Conflict often writes letters that he tears up the next day, but he also remembers

ruefully past letters sent impulsively and the nuked relationships that resulted.

To summarize: Step one is to decide whether to engage or to avoid the conflict by considering your safety and stake in the relationships. Your stake in the relationships is high and safety considerations are low. Assuming you want to engage, step two is to choose your approach by examining whether you have common or conflicting interests (yours are common), how much power you have (you don't have much comparatively), and whether you care more about yourself than you do the other parties (you care a lot about the others).

Dr. Conflict's best advice is that you take a more accommodating approach to resolving these conflicts. By doing so, you may be pleasantly surprised to see the conversation shift from you doing all the accommodating to one where everyone collaborates and relationships are fundamentally strengthened. And that includes the one with your funder, which may lead to greater support in the future.

ENDNOTES

1. When it comes to Dr. Conflict's spouse, she warns that his safety is always at risk. Period; case closed.
2. Dr. Conflict is guilty of hyperbole and, in reality, would never suggest such a course of action.

DR. CONFLICT is the pen name of Mark Light. In addition to his work with First Light Group (www.firstlightgroup.com), Light teaches at the Mandel Center for Nonprofit Organizations at Case Western Reserve University. Along with his stimulating home life, he gets regular doses of conflict at the Dayton Mediation Center, where he is a mediator.

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