Dampening Drama: Lessons from a Large Family



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Resource Type: Risk eNews

Topic: General

I was the oldest of seven siblings, with two military veterans for parents. That's right, seven kids, just like the Von Trapp family in The Sound of Music. We didn't march to a whistle or live in a mansion, but efficiency, order, and education were certainly high priorities. Charts mapped out our chores, buzzers called us to meals, and our possessions were organized by labels and color codes. Frequently our friends would spend the night just to watch the spectacle of our 6 AM family breakfasts.

One risk management tactic I learned from my highly organized family was to be on alert for sprouting drama. As you can imagine, in a family of nine where adults are outnumbered 7 to 2, a small bit of unmanaged conflict can become a category 5 storm in the blink of an eye. My mother was the master of diffusing drama in any situation, and she taught us to avoid raised voices and bad attitudes at all costs. Both parents trained us in conflict resolution from a young age, and how to deal with feelings when you don't want to do what's required.

What's your drama?

At NRMC we've seen conflicts cause all sorts of problems for nonprofit organizations. It's no surprise that the perfect setting for high emotions is a mission-driven organization, where people donate their time and feel strongly about the cause. Some of the unpleasant conflicts we've seen in the recent past include:

- Power struggles on the board
- Power struggles between a CEO and her board
- Unhappy employees who felt that their creative ideas were disregarded by leadership
- Field staff who felt that their contributions were discounted by the team at the headquarters
- Stressed out staff who worried that efforts to decentralize operations would lead to demotions or job loss
- Anger in the wake of announced changes in reporting relationships

These types of internal turmoil are easy to overlook when naming top risks, but unpleasant conflicts potentially exacerbate operational risks and threaten your mission. Poorly managed and neglected workplace drama can lead to:

- *Lawsuits:* Legal action seeking redress of grievances is a worst-case scenario, but in NRMC's experience, unresolved anger about how employee disputes are handled can lead to the perception of illegal, discriminatory conduct.
- *Reputation harm:* Every happy—and unhappy—team member has the ability to speak ill of your nonprofit to a large audience of stakeholders. When dirt on workplace drama leaks to social media channels or the

inbox of a funder, your stellar reputation may lose some of its luster.
- *Loss of momentum and efficiency:* We have seen disputes and tensions slow the decision-making process for nonprofits; when emotions are running high decisions that are important to your mission can grind to a halt.

On the flipside, conflict has the potential to build trust and motivate creativity when handled well. A healthy workplace culture increases the sharing of diverse opinions but minimizes dramatic tensions. In an introduction to their toolkit "Managing Workplace Conflicts," authors at the Society for Human Resource Management explain that good management practices help employees feel heard and welcome to contribute more ideas to the team. The SHRM assessment concluded that with effective conflict resolution employees will "see their employer as fair in their dealings with them and will likely be more satisfied with their jobs."

How to Plan for Constructive Conflicts

My parents would be the first to tell you that when it comes to drama the key is to handle conflict in a constructive way that strengthens both your team and your mission. Here is a collection of risk recommendations for a calm, positive, and orderly approach to dampening drama—whether your group is an office of hard-working employees or a kitchen full of sticky-handed kids:

- *There's no time like the present:* Disagreements often fester because the people with the will to take action are distracted, frustrated or even fearful of making the conflict worse. Schedule time with your team to name the issue and brainstorm solutions. Planning discussions where differences of opinion are aired is a great step toward a culture that celebrates diverse input.
- *Set clear expectations:* Acknowledge that disagreements about strategy and tactics are bound to arise in a mission-focused nonprofit; be clear that sweeping disagreements under the rug is not acceptable or ultimately productive.
- *Give everyone time to adjust to change:* Few kids—or adults—welcome changes to a comfortable routine. Expect pushback if you insist on a routine change without first introducing the concept for consideration. Present new ideas in a way that gives employees, volunteers and service recipients time to fully understand and also get used to the changes.
- *Keep calm:* Did you know that an estimated 10% of conflicts are due to differences in opinion, while 90% are due to using the wrong tone? Adjusting your tone—in an in-person meeting or when writing an email—can make a significant difference to how your message is received. Your word choice, punctuation, and style can promote a healthy exchange or spark a war of words. When communicating a change remember to reflect the culture of kindness, empathy, and other values held by your nonprofit.
- *Don't discount what you perceive as trivial:* Something that seems trivial to you may cause serious harm to already fragile relationships. People working in small quarters can become distracted by small missteps and that distraction can lead to an unwillingness to work peaceably on big projects.
- *Adopt clear rules and strive for fairness:* When I was growing up almost all disputes led to a new policy or procedure of some kind. Is the person handing out cookies keeping the largest ones for themselves? Take turns serving.

If you're thinking that dampening drama is easier said than done, we could not agree more. It can be extremely difficult to handle conflict gracefully, and for many nonprofit teams it may feel impossible to bridge gaping gaps in perspective or preferred approach, much less create a healthy culture of conflict resolution. Don't give up! To quote Thomas Paine, "the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph." Try new strategies and remember to keep humble and ask for help. We recommend the following additional resources for tips on improving communication and management practices at your home base:

- How the Grinch Stole the Workplace
- No Worries: Mastering Productive Worry
- Clash of the Nonprofit Titans: Managing Board and CEO Conflicts
- Person of Interest: Soliciting Insights from Staff in the Know
- Lost in Emotion: Managing Workplace Stress and Conflict