Calling All Factions

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I'm fascinated by research on the human brain, an organ neuroscientist David Eagleman refers to as "three pounds of the most complex material we've discovered in the universe." By luck I happened to catch Tuesday's edition of the NPR Program "Fresh Air," which featured an interview with Eagleman. During his interview with host Terry Gross, Eagleman talked about his life-long interest in the brain, as well as his new book—*Incognito: The Secret Lives of the Brain.*

The proliferation of new research on the brain makes my brain hurt…but just a bit. In the meantime, I'm diving in to find the applicable lessons in the science and explanatory narrative. During his "Fresh Air" interview Eagleman described how forces within one brain may work to steer its human owner in opposite directions. An instinct to break the rules may be met with a sense of duty to the rules. An impulse to take risk without considering the consequences is countered with the recollection of a mother's warning to "look before you leap."

In Chapter 5 of *Incognito*, Eagleman borrows the title of Doris Kearns Goodwin's wonderful book on Abraham Lincoln in referring to the human brain as a "team of rivals." He explains that our brains consist of thousands of expert systems that enable us to plan, predict and prevent (sounds like risk management!), while allowing us to behave in a way that seems altogether human. The ceaseless competition between the "factions" in our brains leads to the common experience of arguing with oneself—the sense of internal conflict that we all experience from time to time (should I? or shouldn't I?). Sometimes the conflict is over something as simple as whether to eat a second piece of pie. In other instances the conflict is over decisions that could affect the mission and communities we serve. Eagleman observes that a brain in conflict—one with active, rival factions—is not necessarily a bad thing. The presence of rival factions may in fact lead to higher quality decisions that serve the mind and body well.

Yet nonprofit organizations rarely begin organizational life with warring factions ready for battle. The birth of a nonprofit is generally the polar opposite of a human birth: there are few, if any tears and pain-numbing medication is unnecessary. But over time, many, if not most nonprofits witness the emergence of competing factions. At first glance disagreements among volunteers, between members of the staff team, or at the board table seem to bring little but delay, disruption and exhausting discord. But like rivalries in a single human brain, the mere existence of factions is *not necessarily detrimental* to the mission of a nonprofit. The key is how disagreements are vetted and resolved and the degree to which the nonprofit's mission and the greater good

are protected and advanced in the process.

Examples of how “factions” arise in nonprofit life include:

- When staff leaders perceive that resources are fixed, and see benefit to jockeying to ensure that their areas of responsibility are adequately resourced.
- When long-serving volunteers who have “paid their dues” feel threatened by newly arrived volunteers who seek, and sometimes obtain, plum positions or worse—appear set on changing the “way we do things here.”
- When disagreement exists at the board level and instead of searching for the best path forward members of the board coalesce around leaders of opposing positions.

There is no clear solution to dissolving factions and resolving the discord that may be inevitable in both brain functioning and organizational life. But if the factions are distracting leaders from your nonprofit’s mission, consider the following steps.

- **Invite warring factions to reflect on the distinction between “dialogue” and “debate.”** I recently rediscovered an excellent chart by Janet G. McCallen which summarizes the differences between “dialogue” and “debate.” In her chart, which appeared in the Fall 2004 edition of *The Journal of Association Leadership*, McCallen points out that “dialogue assumes that many people have pieces of answers and that cooperation can lead to workable solutions,” while “debate assumes a single right answer that someone already has.” I shared the chart with leaders of a nonprofit board who often talk about “improving how we debate issues.” My hope in sharing McCallen’s piece was to illustrate that rather than “improving the quality of board debate,” perhaps the group should focus on improving board dialogue.
- **Communicate, communicate, communicate.** Many disputes in nonprofit life arise from misunderstandings that result from “not knowing.” When staff members and volunteers lack essential details, their brains may attempt to fill in the blanks with logical answers. The salary of the CEO is arbitrary rather than based on comparative data and business reasons. The decision to discharge a senior volunteer was in retaliation for his questions about the staff’s spending authority rather than poor performance.
- **Bring conflict into the open.** Conflicting factions rarely find common ground in the dark recesses of nonprofit life. Hidden from view, each faction works to build support for its view of the matter while holding fast to its determination to be right and without the affect of the bias for sticking with a decision once made (the latter is sometimes called the “default heuristic”). When warring factions are wearing down your mission, take steps to bring the differences of opinion to an open table. Invite parties to engage in dialogue based on an openness to being wrong or ill-informed, as well as an openness to change.

While the journey to resolving conflicts between warring factions may be a bit painful, factionalism in organizational life can also bring diverse points of views into the light. Respectful dialogue around issues of mutual concern can lead to better decisions embraced by all. And a nonprofit “team of rivals” can work together to advance the mission of your organization. The extraordinary human brain is hard-wired to create and manage conflict. And putting one’s powerful and innate human brainpower to work is just another form of service to a cause that matters.

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