



*Why Organizations Go Off Course – Lesson 4: Don't Avoid Internal Conflict*  
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I'm in the process of writing a long article entitled: *Why Organizations Go Off Course*. The article details a series of lessons I learned while growing the Oregon League of Conservation Voters (OLCV),<sup>1</sup> buttressed by my observations of dozens of other groups both in Oregon and across the country.

This series offers a counterpoint to the lessons in my other series: *Why Organizations Thrive*.

Why Organizations Go off Course Lesson Four is: Don't Avoid Internal Conflict

Organizations that develop a culture of avoiding conflict almost always suffer in the long-run.

This is true within individual organizations and with coalitions.

I was once responsible for a coalition that needed to set some policy positions.

After an important meeting where we made decisions, I walked back to the office along the same route as the leader of one of the coalition members. I asked him how he thought the meeting went.

His response: "I was really upset with the decision we made to X."

I was perplexed because I clearly remembered when the issue of X came up that he didn't say a word.

"But you didn't say anything!" I replied. "If you disagreed with the potential decision, why didn't you speak up?"

"I didn't want to make anyone upset," he replied.

Of course, he'd wound up upset, and because his organization was going to disagree with the coalition decision, it had set us up for even more conflict in the long run. Indeed, it took nearly a year to work through the all the problems created by this "avoidance of conflict."

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<sup>1</sup> I served as OLCV's Executive Director from 1997-2009. During that time, we grew from a permanent staff of 1.5 to 11, and a budget of around \$200,000 to more than \$1 million.

## **Good and Bad Conflict**

How can you tell good and bad conflict apart?

Conflict is productive if it's focused on concepts, ideas, and facts.

Conflict is inappropriate if it's personality-focused or mean-spirited. Conflict is also inappropriate if it's an attempt to reopen a decision that was already made, without any compelling new lay of the land to justify it.

You should absolutely call people out for bad behavior when conflict is personal, and not professional. And you shouldn't let the losers of a previous argument "re-litigate it" just because they get the floor at a subsequent meeting.

You also shouldn't let those who're conflict averse shut down appropriate conflict.

One of my favorite co-workers and I used to argue vigorously during meetings (or sometimes between meetings) about strategy. We always felt it was appropriate, a fact which I reconfirmed with her multiple times.

But it came out in one of my performance reviews that another co-worker who witnessed our disagreements had complained about our arguments making her feel uncomfortable.

Being somewhat inexperienced still as an Executive Director, I responded by taking many of the disagreements out of staff meetings. This made us less efficient. And it meant the team overall was less aware of the arguments for and against key strategic decisions.

If I had it to do over again, I would have instead held a staff retreat that would have, in part, focused on productive conflict and debate. I would have accepted that the board might bring it up again in my annual review and explain to them that I felt I was in the right.

## **Conflict and Accountability**

When people don't share their opinions before a decision is made, they're less likely to be fully committed to the decision, which makes holding them accountable to it all the harder.

When people do feel they had vigorously shared their opinions, they are more likely to accept and commit to implementing decisions with which they disagree.

Much like an earthquake relieves pressure on a fault line, open and vigorous debate – followed by a decision – can efficiently relieve the ambiguity that is creating true tension.

Indeed, it's precisely when conflict is not open that individuals are more likely to use back-channel, inappropriate ways to get their way.

## **Encouraging productive conflict into your organization or coalition**

Creating a culture where conflict is accepted isn't as easy as turning on a switch, but there are some concrete steps that can be taken to help.

First, openly acknowledge that a culture of avoiding conflict is a problem. With the coalition I ran, when we started openly acknowledging the importance of voicing disagreements as part of the "ground rules" for our meetings, the quality of our meetings increased.

Second, when setting meeting agendas focus the time on areas of likely disagreement. When preparing an agenda for a strategic planning session, for example, use pre-meeting interviews to identify the major fault lines running through the organization so that they can be debated, rather than wasting time rehashing areas of existing agreement. In any individual board meeting, focus the time on 1-2 bigger decisions where the decision isn't obvious and thus disagreement is likely.

Third, whoever plays the meeting facilitator role should be comfortable requesting conflict. If a point of discussion is going on and people seem to be going off on tangents of agreement, call for somebody to disagree and, if nobody does, move on. If you feel it necessary, call for a devils advocate just so you can feel you've thought through the best counterargument.

Finally, don't let conflict last forever. Air your disagreements, but have a mechanism to resolve them other than consensus. Otherwise, you have a recipe for long-term paralysis. If you insist on consensus and disagreement is paralyzing your organization's ability to move forward, at some point that may mean "breaking up the team" and going forward with a smaller, united team that can rebuild around a true shared vision.

Refusing to create conflict for fear that you'll lose a board member is almost never a recipe for success. I have seen first-hand that a board consistently papering over fundamental disagreements about the purpose of the organization was never going to succeed, no matter how high-powered and functional the individual members of the board were. They were far better off acknowledging and debating their disagreements, coming to a decision, and having the losers in that decision exit the organization.

Of course, aside from getting your organization ready for conflict, there is the individual piece of the puzzle. Some individuals become overly emotional when engaging in conflict. I very much credit my high school debate class and team with equipping me to be a more productive team member in each of my jobs precisely because I can easily voice disagreements without becoming emotional. Short of inventing a time machine and taking high school debate, if you're looking for ideas for how you can become better at conflict, email me directly and I'll come up with some ideas appropriate for your situation.

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