THE THIRD SECTOR REPORT

Managing Internal Politics:
The Achilles Heel of Leading Organizations

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As the countdown for the general election ticks onward, every voter is acutely aware of the power of politics. The political maneuvering to win support, political caucusing to build power structures, and political commentary to straddle choppy waters among divided opinions are all part of the purposeful game.

Political processes and political pressures aren't limited to government. Charitable organizations, trade associations, community service groups and congregations all operate with a political undercurrent. Politics is the natural result of how people go about making decisions that affect other people.

For most, learning to manage the political undercurrents present in an organization is the ultimate school of hard knocks. Most executive directors, board members, committee chairs and fundraisers earn their stripes during those times when each has found themselves on the wrong end of a political process. Most first-time nonprofit leaders will have their positions challenged by others, not by lack of technical know-how, but by their demonstrated lack of political savvy.

This scenario should not be foreign to people who sit on boards or work in voluntary organizations: A sub-committee of well-meaning citizens takes on a specific task with a clear assignment. The people involved perform a high level of due diligence supported by staff expertise to bring forth an informed and thoughtful recommendation. The group convenes often and the results of their efforts are presented with a deep sense of satisfaction and pride.

A presentation of their efforts to a larger group of people, often the board of directors, encounters mixed support. There are those who embrace the results, those who remain silent, and those who loudly oppose the content and its implications. A lengthy and somewhat heated discussion follows. Criticism emerges about potential flaws in the process. Some feel the wrong people were involved. Others perceive the information gathered to base recommendations was biased or insufficient.

A vote for accepting the recommendations is tabled as it's clear not everyone would be in favor. The sub-committee is sent back to the drawing boards. Feelings are hurt, sides are taken, some threaten to leave, passive-aggressive behaviors ensue and the needle of progress gets stuck.

Teaching nonprofit board leaders and executives about political leadership is a touchy subject. It's asking for an examination of an organization's Achilles' Heel. It requires some introspection combined with an honest appraisal of an organization's culture and how that is shaped by the intentions, power positioning, style and egos of its leaders.

Having seen a number of worthy nonprofits implode as a result of organizational politics gone awry, there seems to be six leadership characteristics that separate managed political environments from organizational free-for-alls.

The first characteristic is not subscribing to the idea that every vote on important matters must be unanimous. Unanimity empowers dissention. Inviting respectful disagreement, constructive debate and active listening aimed at consensus-building among diverse people creates a different political landscape than campaigning for votes.

The second factor is standing behind decisions made and moving forward. While revisiting previous actions may be prudent in certain circumstances, a culture of "nothing is ever final" invites circular conversations that usher organizations into a spin cycle.

Following your own rules that you have set for others and consistently being intolerant of disrespect and disparagement are two axioms, if followed, saves a lot of political headache.

Respecting order can never be stated too many times in a positive political environment. Boards, executives, committees and staff each have their own jobs. If people start doing the jobs of other people, there's a guaranteed political problem in the making. If someone isn't performing, make a change.

Defining and insisting on confidentiality is a must when paid and unpaid people are working together. An organization, for example, that isn't clear about what's permissible and not permissible to communicate about others and the organization via e-mail, represents a political landmine waiting to explode.

The biggest mistake any leader of an organization that makes decisions on behalf of other people is not realizing he or she is responsible for a political organization. Establishing and following just a few simple ground rules can mean the difference between a politic that ignites its potential or detonates its demise.