

Dealing with Difficult People

Key Topics: parent involvement, volunteer organizations, team building, financial accountability, Compass Points protocol

Key Challenges: managing conflict, personalizing responses

CONTEXT

An experienced counselor at a suburban elementary school, Darlene is also an active volunteer and president of the Peerless Panther Band Boosters, a parent organization that supports the wind and percussion programs at North Pointe High School where her oldest son plays the trumpet.

Last year, the nominating committee reached out to Darlene and asked her to run for president of the Band Boosters because they thought she had the organizational experience and calm disposition needed to get the group refocused and re-energized. They were concerned that previous boards had sown the seeds of cliquishness through poor communication and lack of transparency and that fewer parents were volunteering for fundraisers and other projects that helped the band excel. Darlene agreed to serve as president and felt that she had a mandate to focus on building community and getting the organizational house in order.

Even though she has professional experience with helping children develop positive peer relationships and reduce conflict, Darlene's ability to manage conflict is stretched to the limit by some of the other adult volunteers. What can Darlene do to keep this organization on track?

DARLENE SPEAKS ABOUT HER EXPERIENCE

North Pointe High School has a long tradition of excellence in the fine arts. I should know because I myself played snare drum in the award-winning North

Pointe Peerless Panther Drum Corps almost 30 years ago. Besides a strong marching band, the program includes symphonic bands, a jazz ensemble, and even a mariachi band.

In the current age of government budget cuts, this ongoing dedication to music education would be impossible without the involvement of parents, and I'm the current president of the Band Boosters at my child's high school. The Peerless Panther Band Boosters is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization with a three-part mission to raise funds for the band, build community among band families, and support all aspects of the band programming.

I think that the nominating committee did a fantastic job of putting a slate of nominees together for this year's board. Besides a president, secretary, and treasurer, there are four vice presidents who each lead a set of related committees. The first VP, Daryl, is in charge of all the fundraising committees, and the second VP coordinates the social activities and improves communication through our e-newsletters and website. The third and fourth VPs share responsibility for the many support committees, such as for travel, uniforms, and equipment.

DARLENE'S LEADERSHIP PHILOSOPHY

My philosophy of being president is that it's my job to keep track of the big picture and create an atmosphere where people *want* to be involved. I'm a stickler about keeping an accurate calendar, but I don't need my hands in every little thing that the Band Boosters have taken on. The current vice presidents are all so smart and experienced that I feel confident about delegating. In fact, I served on the board as secretary last year, and one of my pet peeves was watching last year's VPs ask people to serve on a committee or be a committee chair and then micromanage everything. The way I see it, the board's job is to create policy and then let the worker bees have their say and do all the work.

I drew on my skills as a counselor and facilitative leader to work with the board over the summer. At our very first meeting, I facilitated an icebreaker called 3-2-1. Each person jotted down 3 things about themselves, 2 things that they love about the Peerless Panther Band, and 1 burning question that they had about the Band Boosters. As we shared our answers, we learned about one another and our values. The burning questions included a range of concerns such as why fewer parents are volunteering, whether we could have a relaxed event like a family picnic, what projects need money, and what role the board plays. We all agreed that our number-one goal was to improve the sense of community of the Band Boosters, and we even talked about how all initiatives

could be team-building experiences. Instead of evaluating the Boosters' success with only simplistic measures such as how much money we raised, we decided to also keep track of the number of first-time volunteers and total number of volunteer hours and conduct a parent survey at some time during the year to ask for direct feedback.

INTRODUCING DARYL

One of the newcomers on the board is Daryl. He is the vice president for fundraising, and I really appreciate his work ethic. He is present at every meeting and is amazingly organized. His twin boys are sophomores this year, but when they were freshmen, Daryl and his wife volunteered wherever they could. Daryl's major contribution has been getting the dads organized to load and unload equipment for all the football games, contests, and concerts. Although I think of myself as a feminist, I appreciate how having more dads involved at the school is really an asset, and Daryl has encouraged dozens more dads to get involved in the Band Boosters instead of sitting on the sidelines and letting the moms do all the actual work.

Daryl sees it as his personal mission to keep the facilities in good shape. He is very handy, and after a serious rainstorm flooded the practice fields and the parking lot where the marching band learns its formations, Daryl and his sons cleaned up all the accumulated mud with shovels, brooms, and a power washer before the band directors even thought to ask somebody to do it.

I also appreciate the fact that Daryl is a sharp businessman, and he used his negotiating skills to get the Band Boosters much better deals with the various vendors we use for fundraisers.

THE CLASH

As much as I appreciate Daryl's "just get it done" attitude, I think that he is the most annoying person on the board. For example, early last fall, the board voted to spend up to \$1,000 to purchase materials to improve the storage closets where all the uniforms are stored. Daryl offered to use his handyman skills to add as much shelving as possible and upgrade the lighting so we can actually see everything that's in the closet. Although we went ahead and committed the funds, I thought we had an understanding that the actual work could be completed later in the year when marching season was over and our schedules weren't so busy with weekly football games and traveling to marching contests.

Daryl had a different idea. He wanted to jump right in and get it done. The morning after the meeting, Daryl sent an email to Jenny, the Booster treasurer, and cc'd me. He asked for immediate access to the funds and suggested that Jenny obtain a prepaid credit card so that Daryl could go to the lumber store to get the materials. Jenny wrote back that evening when she got home from work and explained that getting a prepaid credit card was not the best way to account for the money. She suggested that Daryl go to the lumber store and get a statement for how much the shelving and fixtures would cost. Jenny could then write a check to the store ahead of time for the exact amount, or Daryl could pay for the items himself and she would write a reimbursement check as soon as possible. She also gave us a heads up that she would soon be on an extended business trip, and she felt stretched thin because one of her younger children had been ill. She and her husband were doing a juggling act to keep their two jobs and family obligations in balance. Understandably, Jenny's volunteer work was at the bottom of her priority list.

Because Jenny was an experienced treasurer, I deferred to her judgment about how the purchases should be made and recorded. I'm no accountant, but I know that maintaining impeccable financial records is mandatory for keeping our tax-exempt status. I don't want to end up owing back taxes and fines if the Band Boosters are ever audited. When it comes to finances, I prefer being slow and careful. The shelves could wait.

Daryl was ticked off. On top of that, another crisis emerged when the third VP and the committee chair in charge of travel arrangements got into an argument and the committee chair resigned. This was a huge blow because the band was traveling to the state capital in less than a month's time. I talked to each woman one-on-one, but the damage had already been done. Other members stepped up to get the work done, but I was getting more and more resentful of these unexpected demands on my time. Although I'm dedicated to running the Band Boosters in a professional way, it is a volunteer organization. We need to put the egos aside and be kind to one another.

It was quite clear that the board needed to do some work around our work styles and exactly what we could expect from one another as the leaders.

ADDRESSING THE TENSIONS

I was afraid that this tension would eat up all the good feelings that we had worked so hard to establish over the summer. I sent this email to the entire board.

Dear Board Members:

Several people have expressed frustration with issues such as feeling ignored or undervalued, feeling stymied, feeling overwhelmed, and feeling unsure about proper procedures.

I strongly believe that working through this must be done face-to-face. The first item on the Board Meeting Agenda for our next regular meeting will be discussing and negotiating the expectations that we have of one another as well as guidelines for communicating effectively. If this is the only thing we do that evening, it will be time well spent.

I have been so impressed and amazed at what we've been able to accomplish so far as an all-volunteer organization. I hope this can make us be even more effective.

Most sincerely,
Darlene
Peerless Panther Band
Booster President

I drew on my experiences as a counselor to develop an agenda for that evening and decided to do the Compass Points (School Reform Initiative, 2014) protocol as an activity to help us understand our preferences in group work. In the Compass Points protocol, each direction represents a particular work style. For example, a "North" is someone who likes to act and plunge right in. A "West" pays attention to detail and asks a lot of questions before acting. An "East" likes to look at the big picture and the possibilities before acting, and a "South" is very caring and likes to know that everyone's feelings have been taken into consideration and that their voices have been heard. After the facilitator reads a description of the four directions out loud, each member self-selects what direction he or she is. They get with the other people who share that direction, answer some reflective questions about the strengths and limitations of their style, and present the answers to the whole group. When the activity goes well, the participants gain insight into their own style and learn what other people need in order to work together effectively.

It was easy to peg Daryl as a North—someone who jumps right in and gets things done. I wanted the whole board to be aware of our different personality types and appreciate how we each bring something important to the team. I especially wanted Daryl to see that I admired his talent for starting and completing initiatives, but the organization had to balance that with attention to detail, regard for feelings, and a clear focus on our overarching mission.

FROM BAD TO WORSE

The activity was a disaster. We hold our meetings in a classroom near the band hall, and Daryl actually walked out of the room. He stood in the hall and pretended to make phone calls for work while the rest of us engaged in the activity.

I didn't know what to do. Should I publicly berate him? If I were really his boss, I would have written him up for undermining my authority, but I was afraid that Daryl might resign in disgust if I confronted him. Would confronting Daryl get the group back on track or make it disintegrate?

I struggled internally. Should I do nothing and just go on with the activity? I really wanted to see how the other board members self-identified, but what I really, really wanted was for Daryl to pay attention. I wanted to be respected and appreciated for what I bring to the table. I wanted Daryl to respect the *team*, but he was pouting out in the hall. At that moment, I felt desperate for an outside facilitator. Taking care of the agenda, taking care of our learning, taking care of Daryl, and taking care of myself was too much for one person.

I remembered reading an article called "The Zen of Facilitation" (Killion & Simmons, 1992) that advised, "If unsure what to do, do nothing," so I slogged through the activity as planned and let Daryl stew by himself out in the hall. The rest of us learned that the second VP and I are Easts. Our detail-oriented treasurer is definitely a West, and the rest of the VPs are Norths—although some said they had trouble deciding and could have stood in another group. Only our secretary, Lois, was a South who prioritized hearing all voices. My vision of a highly functioning board focused on community building was crumbling around me.

EVEN MORE AWKWARDNESS

I delayed dealing with Daryl and busied myself with making sure that the trip to the capital went as planned. A few weeks after the Compass Points incident, Daryl and I found ourselves working side by side selling tickets to the holiday dance in the cafeteria. Our conversation was cordial, so I felt like the tensions from the previous board meeting had been smoothed over. Perhaps time does heal all wounds.

When I gathered my things and headed out to the parking lot to return to my job for the afternoon, Daryl was close behind. "Hey, Darlene," he called out. "Can I talk to you about something?"

I smiled and thought to myself, "Nice. He's finally going to apologize for walking out of the board meeting."

Daryl held the lobby door open for me and when we got outside he said, "I didn't want to embarrass you in front of the board, so I've been wanting to catch you alone. I think you play around too much during our meetings."

I was flabbergasted. I was expecting an apology, and instead I got a dressing-down about how my vision—which I thought was a shared vision with the whole board—was inadequate and my concerns about process were just a waste of time.

Daryl's vision was all about making physical improvements to the band facilities and equipment. If anybody had questions, they were just being obstructionist. He thought that I should toughen up and make Jenny, the treasurer, do all of her tasks in a more timely manner. And instead of having an icebreaker or team builder at each meeting, we should just stick to business.

I wilted. I felt like we had no common ground. What others thought were my best leadership qualities—an ability to bring people together, the skills to run interactive meetings, a value for listening to multiple perspectives—Daryl thought were my deficiencies. I felt totally inadequate. Daryl needed a president with a different set of leadership qualities. How could I possibly be what I considered to be my best self and run the Band Boosters in a way that Daryl could respect?

MAKING A RECOVERY

I had obviously lost a lot of credibility with Daryl, so I tried to calm down and use this tête-à-tête to repair our relationship. First, I just listened as he unloaded all the ways that he was concerned with the progress of the Band Boosters. I tried to project a neutral stance and show concern for Daryl's perspective and his frustration. I didn't want to start an argument. I just wanted to listen and understand.

As he talked, I realized that Daryl and his energy were misplaced on the board. Instead of fundraising, he should have been in charge of all the facilities and the never-ending efforts to keep the uniforms clean and the equipment in good repair. He was happiest when his hands were busy and his task was clear. Flexibility and ambiguity agitated him.

However, when he started to reiterate that I needed to toughen up and give more directives to the other officers, I decided that I needed to toughen up with him.

"Daryl," I interrupted. "I'm hearing you say that we need clear lines of authority, so I'm wondering why you walked out of the board meeting last month. I'm the president, and I felt disrespected when you refused to participate."

He looked sheepish. "Well, I hadn't thought of it that way. I didn't see the point of doing an activity where you already knew the answers. You said yourself that you knew I was a North, or whatever."

"I know, Daryl. I tried to create a learning experience where we could learn about one another. While you are making sure that we get things done, I'm making sure that we're doing the right thing, Jenny's making sure that we do it the right way, and Lois is making sure that everybody comes along. I guess it looks like we spend a lot of meeting time on team building, especially for someone who hates meetings. I could drop all of that stuff, but then I don't think we could accomplish our goal of building community. We have to know each other."

Daryl didn't necessarily agree, but he did apologize for his rudeness. We shook hands, walked to our cars, and returned to our paying jobs for the afternoon.

DARLENE REFLECTS AND CHANGES

Now that I had a better understanding of what made Daryl tick, I changed the way I interacted with him. I reevaluated my agendas for the board meetings and decided to have a more businesslike structure for some meetings so that decisionmaking could be accomplished more efficiently. I also made a list of nonurgent tasks, so that whenever Daryl got antsy, I could assign him a task to keep him off my back. All the storage closets are beautifully organized now! Finally, whenever I got an email from Daryl that I thought was too demanding or brusque, I had my husband draft the reply, and I just signed my name to it. My husband could more easily focus on the facts and keep the feelings out of it.

Daryl and I will never be friends, but by figuring out his motivations, I was able to keep him engaged and stay focused on our mission.

Chapter 6 Discussion Questions

What?

1. Describe the context of this case and the leadership choices that you notice throughout the scenario.

So What?

2. What leadership strategies work well for Darlene? What needs work?
3. What facilitation strategies work well for Darlene? What needs work?
4. Are facilitation and leadership ever at odds?
5. How does being a volunteer organization affect how people work with one another?

Now What?

6. What is your most comfortable work style when you work with groups?
7. How do you work with people who are very different from you?