

# Advocating for the Devil: Transforming Conflict in Libraries

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Change invariably brings conflict, often accompanied by the notion that conflict is destructive and negative. William Pettas and Steven L. Gilliland, writing in 1992, comment on the relative lack of literature on conflict management in libraries and the need for library managers to channel conflict to achieve overall organizational objectives.<sup>1</sup> While other more recent works have also addressed conflict in libraries, this theme is still not a common one. Library literature often concentrates on the need to eliminate and control conflict, reflected by terms such as “conflict management” and “conflict resolution.” In the literature of peace and conflict studies, the term “conflict transformation,” as represented in titles by John Paul Lederach,<sup>2</sup> Bruce W. Dayton and Louis Kriesberg<sup>3</sup> and others in the field, has become more common and represents a constructive solution to conflict situations.

One of the central precepts in the literature on conflict is the potentially positive nature of certain types of conflict. Pettas and Gilliland ask “How is library conflict best handled?” and follow by establishing a number of essential factors that lead to organizational health—communication, training, and consultation among them. They conclude with a section on reducing conflict, but also warn that conflict “should not be viewed as an evil to be avoided whenever possible.”<sup>4</sup> Davis Payne in 2010 in *Library Leadership and Management* gives a brief history of the literature of conflict management, discussing the value of conflict and the ways in which it can potentially become a win-win scenario. He also distinguish-

es between cognitive conflict and relationship conflict which is characterized as dysfunctional.<sup>5</sup>

In discussing conflict in libraries, Jane McGurn Kathman and Michael D. Kathman advocate the need to give more attention to group problem-solving methods which allow positive aspects of conflict to emerge.<sup>6</sup> Leah Plocharczyk in particular defines constructive conflict as a benefit to an organization, potentially reducing stagnation and creating a fresh perspective and indeed notes that some managers actually place groups in a situation in which “creative abrasion” takes place in a lively exchange of ideas.<sup>7</sup> Thus, a central issue in any organization becomes the balance between creating an atmosphere in which creativity thrives and ideas are openly discussed while avoiding a toxic environment of continual unproductive interpersonal conflict. The devil’s advocate can be a potentially valuable factor in promoting an atmosphere of openness and creative problem solving without increasing unproductive conflict.

The original definition of a devil’s advocate sheds some light on this role; the origins of this term are in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in a very specific role in the canonization of saints in the Catholic Church. In this process, an advocate would be appointed promoting an individual’s sainthood and another, the Promoter of the Faith who was known popularly as the devil’s advocate, was appointed to argue the opposite position. This was intended to promote the fullest possible examination of the evidence in order to reach the correct decision.<sup>8</sup> However, implicit in this role is the rec-

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ognition that a failure to critically examine all sides of an issue could lead to poor decision making. Today, we also do not necessarily view the devil's advocate as someone who is defending a demonic position but who is instead urging a critical look at another side of an issue. The concept also carries the implication that the individual serving as devil's advocate might not truly believe what she is advocating but instead takes the role for the sake of improved decision making.

In discussing the role of the devil's advocate, this paper will concentrate on individuals who bring up contrary ideas, not those who indulge in dismissal or name calling in characterizing the opinions of others. Sometimes these roles merge and an abrasive style of presentation accompanies useful and innovative ideas which might be voiced in such an unpleasant way that they are discounted. Even when ideas are presented in a more neutral fashion, the devil's advocate who defends unpopular views may be viewed as contrary or difficult.

However, these individuals can use their contrarian roles to foster critical thinking, a role which is very different from that of the bomb thrower launching verbal missiles primarily to enjoy the resulting explosions. The devil's advocate can voice radical notions that oppose attitudes of "we've never done it that way" or "we tried that already and it just won't work." Individuals who disrupt and question established processes can stimulate thought and ultimately innovation, but organizations must be able to distinguish between destructive and constructive conflict and find ways to channel resulting new ideas in a positive way. Conflict between differing ideas is essential to avoid an unquestioning, conformist mentality and thus the devil's advocate can be an energizing force in libraries.

In viewing the role of the devil's advocate, it is essential to distinguish between the conflict of ideas, which can be very productive, and interpersonal conflict, which is almost always destructive. Sometimes, an initial discussion or conflict over an idea can become highly personal and separating the two can be very difficult. In discussing a dispute over faculty status for librarians, Patricia L. Weaver-Meyers points out that escalation in this particular circumstance occurred as some librarians became more emotionally involved.<sup>9</sup> In this situation what started out as a conflict of ideas became more personal, and in all strong disagreements it can be difficult to view issues in strictly rational, unemotional terms. Anyone who has followed comments on a news story posted on a

website will see how quickly those who disagree about positions can descend into *ad hominem* arguments and sometimes vicious personal attacks. The almost inevitable ultimate salvo occurs when someone or something is compared to Hitler and the Nazis—a tendency so ubiquitous that resulted in Godwin's Law of Nazi Analogies,<sup>10</sup> a somewhat facetiously proposed principle that indicates how thoroughly arguments can become corrosive and unreasonable.

While excessive conflict can destroy morale, extreme conflict aversion can also be destructive. Failing to deal openly with conflict can lead to passive aggressive behavior in which overall organizational morale is poor because of problems that are never directly addressed or discussed in an open forum but instead simmer with individuals and small subgroups. A devil's advocate in an organization can help bring conflict into the open, making it acceptable to voice contrary opinions and more difficult to follow the path of hidden conflict.

As philosopher Isaiah Berlin points out in his classic *Crooked Timber of Humanity*, Utopia connotes peaceful perfection but in reality, a society or an organization without conflict becomes static and inflexible, unable to deal with new challenges and unaccepting of new ideas.<sup>11</sup> In a similar vein, David Payne draws the distinction between functional conflict, involving open discussion of ideas and practices, and dysfunctional conflict which concentrates on turf wars, face saving and interpersonal disagreements. He indicates that managers are responsible for creating an environment in which the latter is minimized while the former thrives, thus leading to an atmosphere of creativity while improving decision quality and morale and ultimately increasing innovation.<sup>12</sup>

Why would a devil's advocate be particularly important in a library setting and how might this role function in promoting positive conflict? As in most other organizations, libraries make decisions in groups, with feedback and input viewed as valuable to the decision making process. To understand the devil's advocate role, it is necessary to examine the nature of group dynamics in making decisions. Research on group dynamics and decision making has often noted the phenomenon of groupthink, or the tendency of groups to conform "when their motivation to maintain internal consensus overrides their rational appraisal of information which is common in large organizations and which can lead to poor decisions."<sup>13</sup>

A number of researchers have found that group decisions can be manipulated, even in cases where the leader, or the majority group, is making a poor decision. In one experiment, Charlan Nemeth and Cynthia Chiles exposed groups of individuals to colored slides. In a group where the majority deliberately named the wrong color, subjects tended to agree with a clearly incorrect choice. As many as 70% of the individuals would call a slide orange when individuals judging on their own unanimously agreed that it was red. However, if individuals had previously been exposed to a situation where someone else disagreed with the majority, they would call out the correct color. Thus, in this instance exposure to a previous example of a situation in which the majority was challenged appeared to have an impact.<sup>14</sup> A devil's advocate might be the challenger needed to counteract this groupthink effect.

Charlan Nemeth and Brendan Nemeth-Brown are among those researchers who have found that minority dissent encourages more ideas and greater creativity in the ideas.<sup>15</sup> A devil's advocate can be invaluable in a groupthink environment by creating an environment in which such dissent is modeled. By questioning the majority, this individual forces the group to consider alternatives and to weigh evidence more carefully. The strength or weakness of an argument can often be discerned more clearly when it is challenged and examined. According to Charles R. Schwenk and Richard A. Cosier, in addition to seeking internal conformity, groups can rely too heavily on expert opinions, either from outsiders or group leaders especially in ambiguous or uncertain environments.<sup>16</sup> The devil's advocate can help to counteract this tendency as well.

Groupthink is also influenced by the style of a leader or leaders. Groupthink can be reduced or eliminated by open inquiry and welcoming new ideas and perspectives as represented by a devil's advocate. Leadership roles can influence the importance and acceptance of divergent opinions and thus how the devil advocate is will be viewed. Devil's advocates seem to be more influential in directive leadership styles than participative,<sup>17</sup> so authoritarian leadership styles might particularly benefit from this approach, although authoritarian leaders might be the least inclined to welcome a critical examination of their ideas. Certainly, a challenge from a devil's advocate is not the only way in which a leader's ideas might be

questioned. Arnold P. Goldstein recommends certain leader behaviors that will encourage independent thinking, including situations in which the leader: 1) does not immediately state his or her own beliefs, 2) requests that pros and cons be enumerated 3) rewards dissent and critics, 4) arranges for the group to meet without the leader.<sup>18</sup>

A significant book discussing group dynamics comes not from the field of business, psychology, or sociology, but instead from history. Doris Kearns Goodwin's highly regarded *Team of Rivals* describes the formation and functioning of Abraham Lincoln's Cabinet. Lincoln did not take the easy path of surrounding himself with sycophants who would never challenge his beliefs but instead chose individuals who in some cases opposed him for the presidential nomination and expressed views that were in opposition to his own. In essence, Lincoln decided to recruit a Cabinet filled with potential devil's advocates and to benefit from their divergent ideas.<sup>19</sup> His leadership style has been highly praised in the way in which contrary views were incorporated into decision making.

Organizations as well as leaders have varying views of how to deal with oppositional views. In some creative groups, conflict about new ideas is seen as exciting and essentially non-threatening, providing opportunity for positive change. In such a group, a devil's advocate might be welcomed. Other groups may see all conflict as annoying and disturbing group functioning.<sup>20</sup> Libraries and other organizations often stress teamwork and consensus building and indeed those can be valuable organizational tools. However, according to Charlan Nemeth, the desire for consensus can actually be a culprit in poor decision making. The need for group harmony can become more important than the need for a reasonable decision.<sup>21</sup>

Incorporating minority opinions into group decision making is viewed as critical, but variables in team dynamics will influence the minority opinion holder's willingness to express her ideas, but Guihyun Park and Richard P. DeShon clearly indicate that minority opinion holders who influence group decisions have greater satisfaction with the team because of a perception that they are respected.<sup>22</sup> In such an atmosphere, a devil's advocate would feel valued and able to openly express divergent opinions and thus strengthen group decisions.

In a similar role to the devil's advocate, Liisa Valikangas and Guje Sevón have identified the jester

as being someone who can influence group culture. These individuals primarily are critics or ridiculers of a leader's or a majority position, but do not necessarily strongly advocate positions of their own; however, they also invite a more critical approach to group problem solving. However, the jester is primarily an individual who holds the views of others up to ridicule, whereas a devil's advocate can offer a more reasoned critique or an alternative scenario.<sup>23</sup>

If this is such a useful technique, would it be a wise practice to have someone artificially assume the role of devil's advocate? Sometimes individuals will preface remarks by claiming that role—for example by saying something like: "I think this is a great decision, but I'd like to play the role of devil's advocate for a minute." This open assumption of the role is certainly less manipulative than planting someone or asking them to argue a position which they don't actually believe. Research does indicate that authentic devil's advocates versus artificially assumed positions had great efficacy in improving decision making.<sup>24</sup> For example, Joseph Valacich and Charles Schwenk describe a technique of introducing structured conflict into decision making in an experiment using college students. An individual or group deliberately takes the devil's advocate role. They compare this approach to dialectical inquiry, a technique which identifies a plan, discusses it, and then develops a second plan based on opposite conclusions, culminating in a structured debate or merits and weakness of both plans. They conclude that this is overall a more effective way of resolving conflict.<sup>25</sup>

In either approach, the need to consider contrary views is clear. Finding examples of poor group decision making is unfortunately all too easy. In considering the years leading up to the financial meltdown of 2008, financial institutions were pursuing risky and ultimately disastrous policies, and yet enormous organizations, some of which were deemed "too big to fail," continued toward the precipice. The dozens of books on the 2008 financial system meltdown frequently mention warning signs and voices of dissent that were ignored. Before the crash the lemmings marched along, ignoring any contrary voices, and a clear warning on the dangers of groupthink is expressed by Roland Bénabou in his analysis of the crisis.<sup>26</sup>

Any discussion of group dynamics and decision making must take into account interpersonal considerations. One of the dangers faced by a devil's advocate is hostility from others. As described earlier,

there is general agreement that the chaos of interpersonal conflict between individuals and groups should be controlled in a constructive way. In resolving conflict, maintaining ongoing relationships should be a central goal. Dissolution of working relationships is a key reason that interpersonal conflict is so negative. Recent articles on mobbing and bullying in the library workplace describe some of the most corrosive aspects of organizational conflict on an interpersonal level.<sup>27</sup> Even conflict of ideas can become personal and leaders and groups will need to be wary of situations in which a devil's advocate becomes a target. As Thomas Hecker notes, groups can be very powerful and groups that typically conform can be particularly lacking in tolerance for someone with differing ideas.<sup>28</sup>

Robert Gandossey and Jeffrey Sonnefeld actually advocate that individuals should take turns with roles such as enthusiast and devil's advocate.<sup>29</sup> They contend that such techniques can favor reality testing over blind obedience to author and striving toward group coherence, thus avoiding the trap in which an individual could become ostracized or ignored—a reaction from the group such as "Isabel always finds fault, that's just her nature" accompanied by an eye roll and a tendency to stifle this person cast in the role of perpetual nay-sayer. The artificiality and lack of belief in ideas being defended are definite potential drawbacks to this scenario.

Another interpersonal dynamic that can come into play is the tendency in certain group settings for those holding contrary opinions to become reluctant to speak out. In the 2012 book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking*, Susan Cain discusses the manner in which extroverts can take over a group discussion, making it difficult for introverts, with equally solid or perhaps superior ideas, to bring up their contrary notions. Cain notes that introverts often feel more comfortable sharing ideas in writing, while a free for all face-to-face meeting can lead to silence. She also deals with the idea that excellent ideas are often ignored in a group setting if presented by introverts, who speak quietly and are less inclined to push their ideas aggressively.<sup>30</sup>

In an organization in which the role of devil's advocate becomes accepted, a devil's advocate could make a case for her own ideas, and she might also embolden others to feel that contrary ideas are accepted or even encouraged. The manner in which leaders

and colleagues accept differing opinions is key. An authoritarian leader might discourage such ideas. As Raquel J. Gabriel notes, however, a more effective participative leader could solicit feedback in such a way that all could bring out ideas in a non-threatening environment—perhaps by encouraging individual feedback to be sent by email and then summarizing and presenting all ideas or structuring a meeting in such a way that all ideas are presented.<sup>31</sup> It takes a certain personality type to stand up to a group and propose alternate solutions, in particular opposing organizational leaders or outside experts. Those who have a natural bent toward considering ideas in a devil's advocate role might not necessarily be extroverted personalities but instead might develop such ideas quietly and hesitate to bring them forward.

Volatile personalities who engage in personal insults can be difficult even for leaders to contradict, and open discussion can turn into an effort to end uncomfortable conflict. Personality types who prefer harmony can also be at a disadvantage in bringing forth ideas that might lead to group disharmony. Agreeable easy going types might prefer to remain silent, particularly in situations which they view as low-stakes—an attitude of “it's really not a big deal, I won't make waves.” In situations which really aren't high stakes, one decision isn't critical. However, a pattern can be established where certain individuals become accustomed to giving into more forceful personalities and those habits could potentially carry over into more critical situations.

As Brent Roberts notes, managing organizational conflict is not about saving the day but instead preventing emotional conflicts from becoming volatile and preserving ongoing working relationships.<sup>32</sup> One of my favorite resolutions to a conflict situation is in the movie *Absence of Malice*, in which an Assistant US Attorney General, played by Wilford Brimley with a folksy manner and absolute authority, marches in to resolve a complex scenario involving deception of amazing complexity. Brimley settles the hash of the most egregious wrongdoers and his actions will involve two people, and likely three, in the room having their careers destroyed; there is a clear and emotionally satisfying resolution. Brimley has no need to maintain an ongoing relationship with any of these individuals, firing the one person who is under his control who is clearly in the wrong. Satisfying as it

might be to see Brimley mete out punishment, most of us will not find a *deus ex machina* descending to resolve a troublesome situation. Organizations and managers must develop more realistic ways to find workable solutions that can stand up to a critical eye and a thorough examination while preserving the relationships critical to the organization's functioning. In an environment actually encouraging dissent, a devil's advocate might have a role in building a stronger organization.

As is only fitting in a paper on the devil's advocate, a contrary view should be considered. In Tom Kelley's *Ten Faces of Innovation*, he identifies the devil's advocate as a negative force, stifling innovation by constantly viewing only the down side and picking apart new ideas.<sup>33</sup> As previously identified, the bomb thrower who belittles others is not a true devil's advocate. Considering only a devil's advocate and allowing a critical stance to predominate in all discussions is not a productive direction, but instead allowing the voicing of negative views can become a vital part of a discussion. The devil's advocate may not be a role that is productive in testing tentatively stated new ideas, but instead is useful as a challenger of majority opinion or unquestioning adherence to a strong leader.

As Mary Parker Follett, a management expert in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, states: “All polishing is done with friction,”<sup>34</sup> reflecting the need to expose new ideas to the rough and tumble of open discussion. The devil's advocate can be an individual who contributes to polishing or even completely changing established practices or forming new decisions. Clearly, both the organization and its leaders must be open to dissent, in order for individuals to take on this role in a manner that does not increase destructive types of conflict. Kenwyn Smith and David N. Berg in particular note that successful groups must be able to integrate differences and assert that the absence of conflict can threaten the life of a group.<sup>35</sup> As Nemeth and Nemeth Brown assert: “When the mission is important and everyone's contribution is needed and valued—perhaps this is the setting for contentious, energetic, creative cultures.”<sup>36</sup> Libraries are not likely to bring the world's financial markets to the brink of total meltdown or to meld together a decision making group in the face of war, but we can discover that embracing conflict can actually strengthen, not destroy.

## Notes

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