Managing conflict to build consensus

Christine G. Springer

University of Nevada, Las Vegas, christine.springer@unlv.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/sea_fac_articles

Part of the Interpersonal and Small Group Communication Commons, Organizational Behavior and Theory Commons, Organizational Communication Commons, Policy Design, Analysis, and Evaluation Commons, Policy History, Theory, and Methods Commons, Public Administration Commons, and the Strategic Management Policy Commons

Citation Information

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Public Policy and Leadership at Digital Scholarship@UNLV. It has been accepted for inclusion in Public Policy and Leadership Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Scholarship@UNLV. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@unlv.edu.
Managing Conflict to Build Consensus

Few managers have mastered 21st century decision making because it requires more than having a strong intuition about what to do and then doing it. It requires navigating in and out of personality clashes, organizational politics and social pressures.

Candor, conflict and debate are often conspicuously absent. Managers often feel uncomfortable dissenting or groups converge quickly on one solution or critical assumptions remain untested or creative alternatives never surface and then the organization doesn’t just make poor choices, it may well leave unethical action and a strong, shared understanding of its usefulness and rationale.

Equally important, managers often fail to build consensus so that people will cooper-ate in implementation even if they are not fully satisfied with the decision. Consensus requires a strong commitment to the chosen action and a strong, shared understanding of its usefulness and rationale.

Fostering conflict to enhance decision quality while simultaneously building consensus so critical to effective implementation requires the stimulation of debate, keeping conflict constructive, insuring that the process is fair and legitimate and being able to reach closure.

Fostering divergent thinking and produc-tive conflict often requires special tools.

• Role-play methods put managers in the shoes of competitors, alliance partners, customers, the community and successors.
• Mental simulation methods have them consider how events may unfold over time using such things as scenario planning and pre-mortems which envision complete failure and how to avoid it.
• Conceptual models and frameworks designate individuals to launch inquiries and come to different conclusions from different vantage points.
• Point-counterpoint dynamics employ “red” and “blue” teams to scrutinize reasons why and why not to pursue a strategic course of action.

As managers promote vigorous debate, there are pitfalls and solutions. When encouraging it, practice does seem to help. At GE, everyone quickly learned how to engage in heated, productive debates with Jack Welch, who declared “constructive conflict” a core value.

Chuck Knight, Emerson Electric’s longtime CEO, took a different approach and designed confrontation into his organization’s strategic planning process.

Managers gradually became comfortable with it and learned how to prepare, respond, handle contention and use it to make better decisions.

Keeping the conflict constructive requires individuals to raise interesting questions that provoke new lines of discovery while trying to understand others’ positions and remaining open to new ideas. It is dysfunctional when they repeat worn-out arguments, opposing camps dig in their heels and loud voices dominate the discussion.

Often debates become dysfunctional before a manager recognizes the warning signs. It helps to ask and answer two questions about the debate: How many disagreements were there over different ideas? How many differences about this decision’s content did the group have to work through?

The most glaring warning sign tends to be the emergence of interpersonal conflict, as people cross the line from issue evaluation to personal criticism. In this case, it helps to ask and answer two questions about the process: How much anger was there among group members over this decision? How much personal friction was there during the process?

Keeping the process fair and legitimate requires managers to have a “cushion of support” when making an adverse ruling so as people cross the line from issue evaluation to personal criticism. In this case, it helps to ask and answer two questions about the process: How much anger was there among group members over this decision? How much personal friction was there during the process?

Small victories also keep participants from being overwhelmed by complex problems and reams of information.

There are typically two kinds of small victories. The first is a process-oriented victory which does not constitute a solution to the problem but lays the groundwork for finding solutions by agreeing on goals, objectives, assumptions and decision criteria. The second is outcome-oriented victory consisting of partial solutions that move everyone forward because they can be executed in conjunction with other proposals that have yet to agreed upon such as taking alternatives off the table, option-oriented agreements and contingency plans.

Even with a small-victories approach, managers may find it difficult to close down debate. In my experience, they do so by first, setting clear expectations for how the final decision will be made, clearly communicating how the manager’s role and other key actors’ roles will change at a critical juncture in order to achieve timely closure and by building a relationship with a confident who will bolster the manager’s confidence when it is time to act.

This kind of decision-making is not easy but it is critical. Managers who are successful at it start by planning the process early by asking questions like: How will I lead this discussion? What are likely to be the key points of conflict? What mechanisms will spark new thinking? Where in the organization do I have support and opposition? How can the opposition be turned into support? What will be my role?

ASPA member Christine Gibbs Springer is principal with Red Tape Limited in Las Vegas, NV, and a former ASPA president. Email: cggg@aol.com
Copyright of PA Times is the property of American Society for Public Administration and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.