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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 choices unchallenged.

Equally important, managers often fail to build consensus so that people will cooperate 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, ensuring that the process is fair and legitimate and being able to reach closure.

Fostering divergent thinking and productive 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. He introduces the opposition be turned into support? How will I lead this discussion? What are the 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?

In order to avoid any misalignment of the process it helps to:
- Conduct ongoing process checks auditing as a manager one’s ability to generate dissent, manage conflict constructively and maintain legitimacy
- Hold private one-on-one meetings with participants to test alignment
- Ask participants to discuss the team’s approach to decision making among themselves without the manager being present, and
- Pay close attention to nonverbal cues during interactions with advisers, participants and subordinates.

Reaching closure often requires a shift from divergent to convergent thinking in order to be a change decision. Managers direct an iterative process of divergent discussion and convergence as they seek common ground repeatedly during the process by reaching intermediate agreements on elements of the decision which I call “small victories.”

Small victories bring new allies together, lead opponents to recognize common interests, consolidate progress and build momentum. People discover they can work constructively together despite differences and the small agreements catalyze future and broader agreements. 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, opinion-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?

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