Managing conflict to build consensus

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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, organization 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 managers often fail to build consensus so that people will cooperate.

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 test a changing option. 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, options-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 confidant 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 the key points of conflict? What mechanisms will spark new contentions and use it to make better decisions.

Managers gradually become 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?

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