

How I use disagreements to build stronger teams



For a long time, I have facilitated team problem-solving sessions in the same way:

1. First, explore the issue from all sides, uncovering a comprehensive view of the current state and root causes.
2. Next, brainstorm options and agree on a broad path forward.
3. And finally, develop recommendations and specific action plans.

Once plans and next steps are identified, well, I deem the team session a home run. We have moved from chaos into order, from theory into action. It always feels like a triumph of team process and alignment.

Until it suddenly didn't. At a recent team session, I didn't like the feeling in the room at the end of step 3. Team members seemed deflated instead of enthused.

I asked everyone to show, using hand signals from fist to five, how they felt about bringing this plan forward to the organization. Here's the criteria I used:

Fist = over my dead body

1-2 = serious concerns and not really on board

3 = I can live with it but....

4 = feeling pretty darn good

5 = can't wait to get started

What I saw around the room astounded me. Responses ranged from 2.5—5. I couldn't believe there were still 3 team members with serious—stop the presses—concerns.

I learned that team members felt swept along by the process, guilty about not going along with what the team leader so obviously wanted, and eager to demonstrate alignment and teamwork.

So what can you do to ensure team members don't just give up too early? Here are three ideas you can try:

1. Create real space for disagreement. Ask good questions to promote speaking up such as:

- What's a contrary view?
- What have we not considered?
- Why would this fail?
- What's the one thing holding you back from full support?
- What has not been said that we should discuss before we move on?

2. Check in on how people are feeling. We are focused in business on facts and data. And while we shouldn't make our decisions solely using "gut feel," we shouldn't ignore our intuition and our inner voice which usually expresses our fears and concerns.

3. If you are the team leader, make sure you are not skewing the direction based on your personal views. If you have already decided, then tell the team. But if you really want to hear unbiased views, share yours last.

Don't get me wrong. I love building team alignment and collaboration. But I also think we need to work just as hard to promote divergent thinking and unpopular views. Build a stronger team by getting good at disagreeing!

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