

From Conflict to Consensus

Three Critical Tasks for Leaders

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Failure to achieve consensus can take your company down, as leaders at a number of organizations in recent history can attest. What if you were running one of those companies, and you realized in hindsight that the failure didn't need to happen? Well, it doesn't – most of the time.

INTRODUCTION

A recent Conference Board article *Why Can't We all Get Along?* points to the high costs to any organization of failure to build consensus on critical issues — including strategy, direction, priorities, and values. Citing company examples from HP to Zippo, the author builds a compelling case for leadership commitment to seeking – in fact, insisting on – alignment on the big questions. When the arrows fail to point in the same direction on crucial issues, the trajectories move people further apart with every unmet expectation, role conflict, and political skirmish. People begin to act more as lone agents and less as members of a strong community with common goals and priorities.

That is hardly a news flash to any leader who has tried to get results with a team in conflict. Yet many leaders shrink from trying to reach consensus – “It's too hard,” “It takes too long,” and “It never happens,” are typical refrains. While I'll be the first to concede that building consensus is difficult, in this article I lay out three approaches that help make it easier.

CONSENSUS: AN ESSENTIAL TASK

But first, what is consensus and why is it important?

We know consensus as a process where key stakeholders have equal voice and ultimately agree to support implementation of the final decision. Individual members may feel that other choices would have been better for one reason or another, but a consensus decision is authentic when all members have had a chance to express an opinion and come together on the final choice(s).

Consensus is not about being wishy-washy, or abdicating leadership. Nor is it about getting to a decision that will “please everyone.” With consensus, group members agree to support a decision, regardless of where they might have been at the start of the process or whether they preferred a different direction.

In fact, a leader who has a smart and capable team with no significant differences of opinion might be wise to worry a bit—if it seems too good to be true, it probably is.

We know reaching consensus is sometimes critical. But how, exactly, do you DO it?

A leader at the helm, whether CEO or project team lead, can begin by embracing the responsibility that is the leader's alone—setting a course for decision making and leading the process to closure. The process can be informed by the guidance of trusted advisors, but the leader can't delegate or abdicate this duty. If a leader can't marshal the forces of key people to move in the same direction, no one else can or will.

CONSENSUS IS A HASSLE

Especially on difficult or contentious issues, consensus can take time, energy, negotiations, and more time. At some point, the conversation can become stagnant, and people just lose their will to engage with one another. Relationships can get strained, and, ultimately, organizations can falter. So before a leader has to call it and make a unilateral choice, a few tasks can increase the likelihood of a solid outcome that leaves the organization strong and able to take concerted action.

Let's look at three critical tasks for the leader that will help facilitate consensus.

1) AIR THE DIFFERENCES

At least in the early stages of decision making, reframing divergence of opinion as an asset sets the course for productive and fair debate. In our work with clients, we see a basic principle at work in all sorts of decision making: healthy, strong consensus can only exist when people experience that their points of view have been fully understood by the other parties. Period. Once people can stop contradicting one another and listen, a fuller picture can emerge that makes conflict into a dilemma we share instead of positions we must win.

In fact, a leader who has a smart and capable team with no significant differences of opinion might be wise to worry a bit—if it seems too good to be true, it probably is. Chances are important perspectives have gone underground, and are not being voiced for political or personal reasons. It's important that the leader gain a fuller understanding of the questions by integrating the unique vantage points of function, role, and experience. A better informed view can result in better decisions.

Our model, based on the inquiry and advocacy framework in the *Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, is a great way to ensure all views get aired.

When seeking consensus, a balance of inquiry and advocacy is critical.

Through inquiry, the leader helps uncover and grasp useful information. Through advocacy, the leader and group seek to influence others' thinking.

INQUIRY

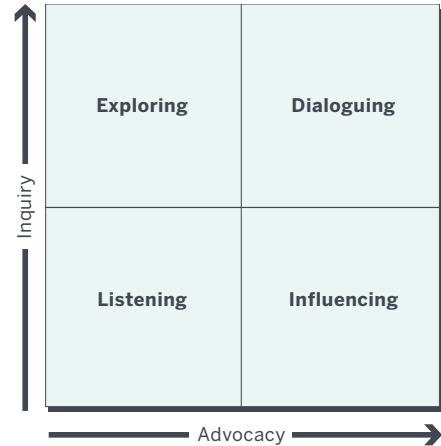
A process for understanding the other's point of view by exploring his/her thoughts, feelings and reasoning.

ADVOCACY

A process for influencing another's thinking and behavior by stating one's opinions and suggestions, and outlining the rationale for each.

STRATEGIES FOR BALANCING INQUIRY & ADVOCACY

- Inquire before you advocate
- Choose when to inquire and when to advocate.



This model covers a range of communication intentions and behavior, with assertions and opinions (advocacy) as one common mode. The other, often less frequent, is seeking understanding of others' perspectives and ideas (inquiry), ultimately the willingness to hear what people have to say. When seeking consensus, a balance of inquiry and advocacy is critical. In your own and others' actions, insist on a combination of expressing and soliciting opinions.

Using questions to spark meaningful dialogue is at the heart of effective group process. Call on those who are communicating less or appear to be holding back. Silent members may seem passively cooperative, but if they hold unexpressed reservations, they are unlikely to support the final decision. Compliance, especially in the few decisions that guide day-to-day actions, will only weaken concerted action.

The inquiry skill of “paraphrasing” is one way to assure another that the leader and the group truly understand the stated points of view. Repeat back what you think you’ve heard, and encourage the speaker to clarify the expressed position. This way the person can confirm he or she is being heard and understood, the baseline of a negotiated agreement.

When advocating, present clear opinions and the rationale. Then stop, and let others respond. A long and articulate explication will sound like noise to people who feel there’s no room for them in the conversation.

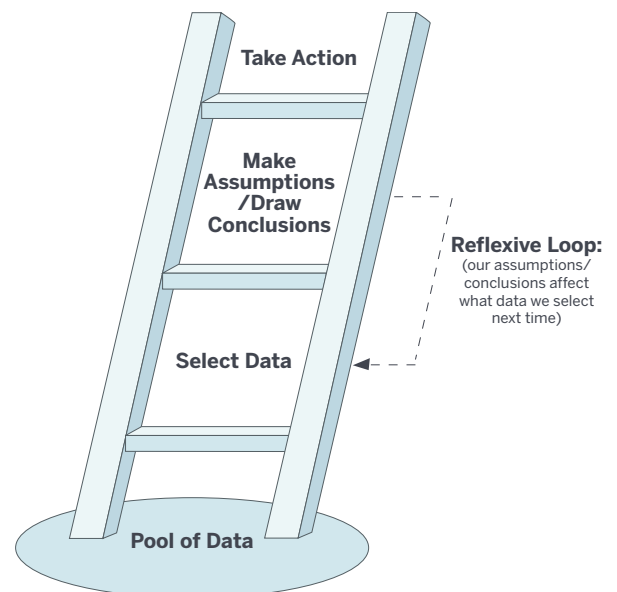
2) FIND THE POINTS OF ALIGNMENT AND AGREEMENT

Some of the most unfortunate lost assets in times of conflict are the often unspoken agreements people do hold. I was facilitating a discussion recently on approaches to succession planning. There were wide differences about the underlying values and beliefs that should form the foundation of future initiatives, and that is where the group focused. The participants got so heated and polarized that they could barely look at each other, let alone negotiate a satisfactory resolution. When they were able to see the vicious circle they were creating, they stopped repeating the destructive pattern, gave one another air time, and identified where they had substantial agreement. From that platform of concurrence, they were able to stop the personal attacks and hammer out agreements on the big questions that required consensus.

Reaching consensus is not about tackling the giant agreement first; often, it's about creating small agreements that serve as a basis to build into the larger ones. Each phase of work, from initial assessment to final decision making, requires agreement before the team moves forward. If a big agreement cannot be reached, the group can fall back to the last agreement and problem-solve from there.

LADDER OF INFERENCE

The Ladder of Inference* is a model describing how humans process information. Our capacity to process large amounts of information depends on selective perception. How we perceive our relationships with others is significantly affected by our unconscious selection process. These unconscious choices can cause conflict in and damage to our work relationships, particularly when we act as if our perceptions are the truth. Remembering the Ladder of Inference can help us to make explicit the unconscious assumptions and self-generating belief systems we hold, allowing for more open and honest communication.



*The Ladder of Inference is based on material from *Overcoming Organizational Defenses* by Chris Argyris. This model is adapted slightly from the derivative model presented in *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook* (page 243) by Art Kleiner, Charlotte Roberts, Richard Ron, Peter Senge and Bryan Smith.

Based on the Ladder of Inference, you can ask questions or make statements in conversations to help clarify your thinking, be sure that you have accurate information from others, and better inform your discussion. Examples of questions or statements:

- To understand something that makes no sense, or is confusing:
“Did you mean...?” Or, *“Tell me more about...”*
 - To test your assumptions about someone’s opinion or rationale:
“Let me see if I’ve got this”... or “It seems like you’re saying...”
 - To overcome your own biases:
“What do you think we’re missing here?” *“What’s the main thing you think we need to understand?”*
 - To ensure your own thinking is clear to others:
“I’m concerned I may have misspoken. Let me try it again.” Or, *“I sense there are some strong concerns about my view. Could you tell me what they are?”*
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3) DON'T LET IT GO UNDERGROUND

An open and honest organizational culture means able leadership at the helm. The leader will want to keep the consensus-building conversation above-board in several significant ways. First, it’s important to level with people about the seriousness of the decision, the urgency around it, and the need for reaching consensus. Motivate the team to take responsibility and work through any differences by helping members appreciate the stakes involved.

Second, don’t ignore underground forces. Denial won’t help you succeed. Secretive disagreements must be surfaced and worked through or they will likely derail implementation. This is where the concept of shared responsibility comes in. If you’ve done a good job of communicating the high stakes, and the importance of consensus, you can request that team members adopt shared responsibility for the outcome. Often, these conversations need to begin in private with you to set expectations, understand people’s issues, and prepare them for how they will engage.

Finally, keep guerilla warfare out of the process. Adopt strict ground rules to minimize stealth deals and political maneuvering as decision-making tactics. And model the behavior of honest and open communication. In an atmosphere of safety, you might try allowing each

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person to speak uninterrupted on the topic at hand, without commenting on others' ideas or defending personal positions. A neutral facilitator can help here, too. Remember this caution: if the divergence of opinion goes underground, it's just a matter of time before the foundation of collective resolve is damaged.

There is a great story about how President John F. Kennedy managed his ad hoc think tank during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. JFK had gathered some of the best minds available, including some who had been his adversaries. There was a handful of strongly held beliefs about what the US should do to address the nuclear threat brewing 20 miles off the Florida coast. Kennedy assembled all the key experts and stakeholders into a room, and laid out on a blackboard the five or so top response options in ascending order of risk. It quickly became clear that several were either too extreme or too inconsequential to be considered. By forcing the hallway conversations into the room, the group was able to develop a plan that worked.*

A FINAL NOTE...

Righteous disagreements are inevitable – you know, the ones based on honest and well-considered opposing perspectives. When striving for consensus, keep in mind that it has been reached when everyone agrees to support a decision. When setting direction and seeking consensus is required for implementation, these tips will help you keep it real.

The tie-in between consensus and direction-setting is important. With finite resources, focus is imperative. Consensus builds agreement on what will be the company's focus, and this is crucial to success.

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*Source: John Stoessinger, author of *Why Nations Go to War* and an expert advisor to JFK during the Cuban Missile Crisis.