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Tools For Schools

Consensus: Tap Into a Powerful Decision-Making Tool

by Joan Richardson
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The meeting ended and the participants headed home, most of them believing they had reached consensus on the issue.

One team member hadn't said a word during the meeting. But, in the parking lot afterwards, he unloaded on another team member about his objections to the agreed-upon plan.

"But I thought we had consensus on that,'' said the confused listener.

"Did you hear me say I agreed with it?'' asked the disgruntled member.

"Well, no, not in so many words. But you never said you didn't agree with it. Why didn't you speak up during the meeting?''

Oops. Isn't this how groups too often reach consensus? Or at least reach what they think is consensus?

Consensus is often held up as the ideal way to make decisions. At its best, decisions reached by consensus will have more power and influence because of the support from the decision-makers. At its worst, however, consensus can mean groups nodding in unison but not backing up their decisions with conviction.

"Consensus is a cooperative effort to find a sound solution acceptable to everyone, rather than a competitive struggle in which an unacceptable solution is forced on others,'' says Thomas Kayser in his book, Building Team Power.

But consultants who work with groups on decision making agree consensus is not appropriate for every situation nor every decision.

"It's not in our best interest to even try and use consensus for every decision,'' said Ann Delehant, a New York consultant who works on team process issues.

Kayser agrees. "It should never be considered the only way or the best way to make decisions,'' he writes.

Kayser says consensus works best with major elements of a decision such as defining the problem, identifying assumptions about the situation, establishing criteria for evaluating solutions, choosing the final solution, and setting priorities.

Delehant inserts another component. "When

ownership and commitment to a decision are fundamental to a successful implementation, that's when

I recommend consensus,'' Delehant said.

In her work with teams, Delehant leads groups through a process that helps them identify the problems they will solve, who will be involved in solving those problems, and how they will make their decisions.

For example, in some cases, a team may designate a subgroup to decide some issues because of the expertise of those group members. That subgroup would then inform the larger group about its decision.

A team also can agree by consensus that one individual can decide relatively trivial matters or act when decisions must be made quickly, she said.

STEPS TO CONSENSUS

In Team Building Toolkit, Deborah Harrington-Mackin recommends the following steps to reach a decision. The group:

1. Discusses the topic, raises questions and concerns, and presents data and options for solutions.

2. Decides whether consensus is appropriate for this decision, how much time will be needed, and what to do if consensus is not achieved.

3. Explores differences and similarities, agreements and disagreements.

4. Makes suggestions or modifications on the proposed solutions.

5. Generates a new solution based on the discussion.

At this point, Delehant said facilitators need to poll each person in the group, pointedly asking, "Do you agree with and will you support this decision?''

Facilitators cannot wait for members to volunteer their opinions. Going person-by-person around the table ensures that every person voices his or her position and prevents opponents from hiding behind silence.

Responding that "I can live with it,'' is not satisfactory, she said. "Saying 'I can live with it' is the lowest form of consensus. If everybody around the table says out loud that they can support it, then you have true consensus. I want people to walk out of the room ready to support the decision,'' she said.

Consensus has been reached when all members can comfortably say they support the solution or decision.

WHEN THERE'S NO CONSENSUS

If polling reveals a lack of consensus, the group should turn to its alternative position. Consider these suggestions from NSDC's School Improvement Planning Manual.

1. Create a compromise position and ask everyone to react to that.

2. Provide private "think time'' and begin discussion again.

3. Leave the issue and return to it later.

4. Organize small groups to reach consensus and then begin large group discussion again.

5. Create a contradictory statement to refocus the discussion and identify real concerns.

6. Choose another facilitator.

At the opposite end of the spectrum from "no consensus'' are groups who agree too much, a phenomenon Kayser labels "group think.''

"Group think occurs when the group strives so hard for agreement that virtually all critical thinking is eliminated,'' he writes.

To achieve true consensus, teams must explore and resolve their concerns before they reach a decision acceptable to all.

Exploring the conflict over issues is a sign of a healthy group, she said.

"I love conflict when I'm working. For me, the ideal group would start out wrestling and disagreeing. Because they trust each other, they're willing to share all their thoughts with each other and trust that they can work things out,'' she said.

True consensus emerges from this spirit of trust and openness, said Delehant.