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## "Achieving Excellence" Issue 23 - July 2022

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## Welcome

Welcome to the July issue of "Achieving Excellence" which is inspired by clients and friends of Seventeen Gorman Advisors. We enjoy new ways of thinking and new ways of helping you achieve your goals.

Seventeen Gorman Advisors is a consulting practice focused on improving individual and organizational performance through skill building programs and developmental services.

Our approach to problem solving and issue resolution involves client participation at all points in the process. Above all, we listen to our clients to understand their needs and goals so that the solution we develop together - as true partners - provides a sustainable business advantage.

Best Regards,

*Jeffrey C. Leventry  
Principal*

## In Your Quest For Excellence

"If we don't trust one another, then we aren't going to engage in open, constructive, ideological conflict." - *Patrick Lencioni (American Business Management Author)*

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## The Value of Encouraging Constructive Disagreement



As a facilitator of the **Leadership Development Program Seminars** at Rider University, I utilize an article by Robert Glazer (Founder and CEO of Acceleration Partners) entitled "Why the Best Leaders Encourage Dissent". The article explains the decision of President Abraham Lincoln to fill his cabinet with political adversaries in order to gain insight from those who held contrary views. He did this to ensure that important decisions were made as a result of a full discussion of the issues by men who possessed unique knowledge, talents and leadership perspectives.

Robert suggests that President Lincoln's approach was "both unprecedented and reflective of Lincoln's own advanced leadership and a high degree of self-confidence". Today's most admired organizational leaders follow a transparent style that invites feedback, healthy debate and disagreement to develop optimal solutions and decisions.

Mahatma Gandhi weighed in on this topic by stating, "Honest disagreement is often a good sign of progress."

Unfortunately, many leaders shun this approach in favor of an autocratic or command-and-control style that encourages staff to follow what the leader either believes or wants to hear. Thus, opposing views and insights are rarely entertained and innovation is often stifled.

### **What is meant by constructive disagreement?**

There are many ways to define this concept, based upon differing perspectives.

However, I prefer the one offered by Mark Peter Davis (Managing Partner of Interplay Ventures). He believes that "the concept of constructive disagreement centers around creating a dynamic where key stakeholders in an organization can (and are compelled to) disagree. The word constructive alludes to the need to raise issues, debate them and resolve them."

The key takeaway from this definition is a desire to encourage thoughtful disagreement in order to maximize the benefit of unique perspectives. During the process, it is imperative to focus on fruitful debate rather than destructive argument often based upon pure emotion. Employing a “give and take” approach, all parties should exhibit mutual respect for each other, while also appreciating and embracing differences of opinions.

### **How can constructive disagreement be fostered?**

I have personally witnessed and implemented various techniques for encouraging thoughtful disagreement in my experience as a business leader and manager.

Based upon my experience, here are several effective tips that can help turn potential conflict into an opportunity for innovation and creative problem-solving:

- First, clarify the vision, the ground rules and the objectives of the discussion so that all parties are on the same page. This helps ensure that everyone understands the arrangement, is focused on the issues that matter most in the debate, and are aware of the end-goal.
- Second, encourage open and honest communication so that all participants are free to provide their candid ideas and opinions. In addition, the reasoning behind any suggestions should be divulged so the parties can begin to understand (and even critique) individual points of view.
- Third, invite all contributors to provide data, statistics and other quantitative information that supports their views. This could include cost figures and other financial data that buttress an in-depth cost-benefit analysis.
- Fourth, document the discussion during all meetings so participants know what was considered, together with the rationale for any proposal or idea. Disseminate the meeting notes immediately following any meeting so the parties have an opportunity to reflect on the session and evaluate which proposals make the most sense or require additional debate.
- Fifth, provide as much time as needed to ensure a robust discussion of ideas and views. Important issues and decisions may require numerous meetings over a period of several weeks in order to devise an optimal outcome, so don't give up if it takes a long time to explore and ultimately solve the problem.
- Finally, thank the parties for their insight, ideas and perspectives so they know how much their contributions are valued and appreciated. This is not only important for the present conversation, but also motivates them to share their ideas in a future discussion.

### **What are the benefits of employing a constructive disagreement approach?**

Managers and leaders who routinely practice constructive disagreement as a decision-making technique achieve many short-term and long-term advantages for their organization. The benefits can be both subtle and tangible for the participants, as well as for the company, while building and sustaining a culture that values diversity of thought and perspectives.

In my experience, some of the key advantages of employing this approach include the following:

- It generates increased participation in organizational decision-making. Encouraging people to express their ideas and views enhances

“buy-in” when the solution is ultimately implemented at the firm.

- It enhances collaboration and teamwork as employees partner with one another to take advantage of unique perspectives and insights gained over time from their diverse experiences. This encourages participants to understand the nature of the issues and discover potential solutions that may not be obvious to any one individual.
- It helps widen options that can be evaluated as potential solutions to problems and issues faced by the organization. As a general principle, when more alternatives are considered (and tested) there is a greater probability that an optimal decision will be uncovered.
- It fosters trust among employees as they work together and rely on one another to develop solutions that benefit from everyone’s unique skill set. Trust supports improved morale and employee engagement at all levels in the company.
- It enhances employee productivity and performance so that workers are more efficient and effective in their roles at the firm. Improved performance has a direct impact on the firm’s bottom line, and augments long-term sustainability.
- It results in improved innovation and creativity that speeds the path to better ideas and business solutions that give the company a competitive advantage in the marketplace.

In conclusion, organizations are constantly tasked with developing optimal solutions that flow from healthy discussions involving a diversity of perspectives. While many options exist to support better organizational decision-making, encouraging constructive disagreement is the approach that I recommend to achieve the best outcomes on a consistent basis.

If your firm is having a problem engaging employees to achieve better decision-making, what actions can you take to change the existing culture so your organization can reap the benefits of encouraging constructive disagreement?

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## Advice for Building a Civilized Workplace



I was fortunate to instruct an MBA course at The College of New Jersey this summer entitled “**Corporate Responsibility & Business Ethics**”. During the course, we discussed numerous case studies that involve serious breaches of ethical conduct throughout corporate America. The consequences of this unethical

behavior run the gamut from costly lawsuits, civil fines and penalties, multi-million dollar settlements, to loss of reputation and brand image, and even incarceration for the convicted perpetrators.

In many of these cases, the “bad actors” are powerful bullies motivated by greed, arrogance and self-aggrandizement. In addition, when they are accused of wrongdoing they often deny any improper conduct, and instead blame others in the organization for their lack of ethics.

Our review of these cases reminded me of a book I bought a few years ago when I was performing research for a bullying article I authored in 2019. The book is entitled “**The No Asshole Rule – Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn’t**” by Stanford University Management Professor Robert I. Sutton. The primary theme of Professor Sutton’s book is that bullying behavior in the workplace worsens morale and productivity. He then suggests a rule to screen out toxic staff members – the No Asshole rule! He offers the reader two tests for spotting whether a person is acting like an asshole:

- **Test One:** After talking to the alleged asshole, does the “target” feel oppressed, humiliated, de-energized or belittled by the person? In particular, does the target feel worse about him or herself?
- **Test Two:** Does the alleged asshole aim his or her venom at people who are *less powerful* rather than at those people who are more powerful?

If the answer to these questions is yes, then there is a good probability that this person is not only an asshole, but acting like one to other peoples’ detriment.

### **What is the cost of assholes in your organization?**

Those of us who have personally worked with (or for) bullies know first-hand the harmful impact that these individuals have on the organization, and its employees. Thankfully, Professor Sutton has devised an approach to measure the cost of assholes in an organization that he calls TCA (the total cost of assholes in your organization). He then provides the factors that should be considered when calculating the TCA, as follows:

- **Damage to Victims and Witnesses**
- **Woes of Certified Assholes**
- **Wicked Consequences for Management**
- **Legal and HR Management Costs**
- **When Assholes Reign: Negative Effects on Organizations**

His analysis of each of these factors comports with my own experience, and helps explain the magnitude of this issue in today’s workplace.

### **What are the top 10 steps for enforcing the “No Asshole Rule”?**

Professor Sutton indicates at page 88 of his book that “Effective asshole management entails an interplay, fueling a virtuous, self-reinforcing cycle between the “big” things that organizations do – the stated philosophies; the written policies; the training and official hiring, firing, and reward practices – and the smaller ways in which people actually treat one another.”

He further states that “Having all the right business philosophies and

management practices to support the no asshole rule is meaningless unless you treat the person *right in front of you, right now, in the right way*

So, what are the top 10 steps for enforcing the no asshole rule, according to Professor Sutton?

- **Say the rule, write it down, and act on it**– if you can't or won't act on it, then it is better to say nothing at all to avoid being known as a hypocrite
- **Assholes will hire other assholes**– it is important to keep your resident jerks out of the hiring process so they do not hire “jerks like me”
- **Get rid of assholes fast**– many organizations wait too long to get rid of certified and incorrigible assholes
- **Treat certified assholes as incompetent employees**– even if they do other things very well, they ought to be treated as incompetent
- **Power breeds nastiness** – beware that giving people even a little power can turn them into big jerks
- **Embrace the power-performance paradox** – do everything you can to downplay and reduce unnecessary status differences among employees
- **Manage moments – not just practices, policies, and systems**– effective asshole management means focusing on, and changing, the little things that you and your people do so big changes can take place
- **Model and teach constructive confrontation** – develop a culture where people know when to argue and when to stop fighting and, instead, gather more evidence, listen to other people, and implement a decision (even if they disagree with it)
- **Adopt the one asshole rule** – no asshole rules might be most closely followed in organizations that permit one or two token jerks to hang around so that these “reverse role models” remind everyone else of the wrong behavior
- **Link big policies to small decencies**– effective asshole management happens when there is a virtuous, self-reinforcing cycle between the “big” things that organizations do and the little things that happen when people talk to one another and work together

Professor Sutton also reminds us that “the true test of an organization's no asshole rule comes when things are going badly.” Perhaps this is the ideal time to reassess the organization's activities, and formulate a plan of action for enhancing policies that are designed to thwart those who treat fellow employees with disdain and disrespect.

**What is the organizational impact for making positive change?**

In conclusion, the need in today's business environment to build more civilized and respectful workplaces is at an all-time high. Whether you follow the approach suggested by Professor Sutton or employ another technique to weed out the bullies and jerks in your organization, it is well worth the time and effort.

The evidence strongly suggests that taking these steps has tangible benefits, not the least of which include:

- **Improved individual and organizational performance**
- **Decreased turnover and absenteeism**
- **Enhanced engagement and commitment to work**
- **Better productivity**

- Superior employee satisfaction

In light of the above, what actions will you undertake to implement positive changes in your organization that build a more civilized workplace where employee performance can thrive, and where employees desire to learn, grow and make valued contributions in collaboration with their colleagues?

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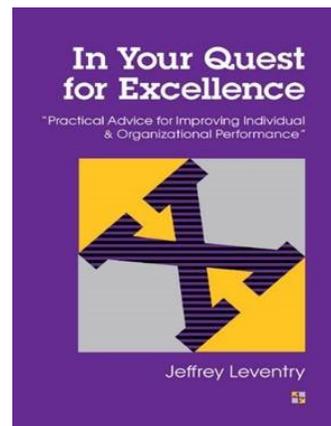
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looks forward to collaborating with you.



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