

The Value of Encouraging Constructive Disagreement

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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?