



Fitness Management managementmemo

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SUBJECT: Decision Making

APPLICATION: How to Deal with Conflict

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Encouraging and Managing Conflict

The right kind of conflict can encourage creativity and learning, and drive innovation. In their book, *Winning Decisions: Getting It Right the First Time*, the authors differentiate between two kinds of conflict: relationship and task. Relationship conflict occurs when style, background or values are under attack. Leaders should steer team members away from this kind of conflict. Task conflict, on the other hand, includes differences of opinion about the task at hand and how it should be completed. Research has found that moderate levels of task conflict are associated with superior performance, a more thorough and creative discussion of decisions, and a better understanding of the issues. If you choose to avoid all conflict, you run the risk of overlooking key issues, having only a one-sided understanding of issues or making overall poor choices.



FOSTERING CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICT

To foster an environment of constructive conflict, show that you welcome it by adopting the following principles:

- Invite dissenters, with the goal of leading toward creative solutions, not hard feelings. Do you view employees with different views as troublemakers or innovators? Seeing them in a positive light will lead to constructive conflict.

- Don't take sides too soon. Avoid expressing your final preferred choice. Announce that you don't want to signal your own views until after a thorough, candid discussion.

- Reduce pressure to conform. The less fear people have of becoming isolated, the more likely they are to speak their minds.

- Establish norms of supporting conflict and creativity. Be clear up front that conflict is for thinking, not for winning arguments. Also, make it clear that disagreements cannot result in explosions. Being critical of ideas is OK; being critical of people is not. Mutual respect must be maintained.

MANAGING CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICT

After adopting the above principles, consider the following tools for putting moderate conflict into practice, and managing it well.

Choose people who will approach decisions in different ways.

Create heterogeneous groups. When creating groups, choose people who will approach decisions in different ways. You can also try putting people of different backgrounds and ages together.

Give two subgroups the same task. Give two groups the same issue to work on, which will almost certainly result in multiple perspectives on the issue, and offer a good basis for healthy conflict.

Require pre-commitment. Before a meeting, ask the group members to write down their ideas about the current issue or decision. Distribute the combined list without names to the entire group before the meeting. This tool will help a group overcome the lure of conformity.

Appoint a devil's advocate. Appoint a staff member to provide dissent. This member should present any alternatives they can think of, and will help get the ball rolling. Research has found that groups that have a devil's advocate develop and consider more alternative solutions to a problem and select a higher quality recommendation. Assign a different devil's advocate at each meeting; otherwise, the group may learn to ignore the devil's advocate's input.

Solicit more than one option from each member. Ask each group member to give

at least two alternative views for each major issue. This will require members to think through the issues for themselves, instead of just hearing someone else's opinion. The group will also generate more alternatives.

Consider minority viewpoints to gain a balanced perspective. Even when a minority viewpoint is wrong, research has shown that it still improves the decision outcome. It forces the group to think of alternatives, better justify the chosen action and find creative ways to alter the final decision to meet a broader set of criteria.

Hold second-chance meetings. Avoid urgency. If you succumb to the desire to just be done with it, you will likely prevent differing views from emerging. Send group members away to think of the proposed solution and possible issues. Then, reconvene.

When the atmosphere is one of trust and mutual respect, moderate task conflict leads to gathering better intelligence, exploring more options, looking at options in more depth and coming to more robust solutions. **FM**

REFERENCE

Russo, J.E., and P.J.H. Schoemaker. *Winning Decisions: Getting It Right the First Time*. Doubleday: New York, N.Y., 2002.

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