

Come together, right now

Does reaching consensus have to be so difficult? Anthony Landale reports on a new approach that might just help teams to reach decisions fast and harmoniously.

Intolerant attitudes. Lack of respect for others. The 'me first' society. You can take your pick as to why people find it so hard to rub along together. But wouldn't the world be a different place if we could find a way to combine our various talents and perspectives rather than argue about them?

Now I don't want to come across as some starry-eyed tree hugger here but I have to say I am encouraged when I come across people who are looking for what unites them rather than what divides them. And even in the cynical world of business it appears there are good-hearted souls who are proving that it makes commercial sense to get people to agree.

Of course you don't need a PhD in astrophysics to work out that disunity in teams makes them ineffective. But what are the techniques that work which can help people to reach consensus? The somewhat surprising answer lies in facilitation.

Hard-nosed facilitation

Some people, of course, think that facilitation is all about being nice, all about making things easy. It isn't. Expert facilitation is in fact something of a high-wire experience. There is no set script and you have to be able to respond to whatever is going on with the people you are working with. If that means dealing with conflict, challenging people or pointing out unpalatable truths then so be it.

In essence facilitation is necessary in business because it is understood that the process of how something gets done can often get in the way of the task itself. So while individuals within a team may be extremely talented and motivated this doesn't mean that they know how to work together.

Facilitators are trained to work with this dynamic - ensuring that issues such as relationships, beliefs and values are included as an essential part of the team's ability to perform.

However, facilitators also have particular methods up their sleeves for particular problem areas and when it come to collective decision-making there is one technique called RapidConsensus which will surely interest managers and team leaders.

Clive Lewis is Managing Director of Illumine, the company behind RapidConsensus and he explained: "We all know in business that decision-making can sometimes be very slow and that sometimes the decisions made don't make much sense to those who are asked to carry them out. So in order to address this issue we have RapidConsensus - an approach that helps people in teams to make good decisions and take action based on those decisions that accelerate projects.

The actual stages of the model are straightforward enough," he continued: "The facilitator involved helps people to understand the issue at hand by winding back to the beginning. People who want to hurry through the decision-making process and get straight into action miss the whole point - namely, that for good decision-making you need to engage the whole group and mine their collective intelligence. Following that, the facilitator gets the whole team to consider what their options are and to identify what actions they need to take to get there."

So what is the secret?

So far so good but where's the magic? The secret it appears is based in the understanding that people own what they help create. In other words people need to feel engaged and enthusiastic about an outcome before they commit to it. Just imposing a decision will inevitably fail to engage people's energy or motivation. Additionally RapidConsensus recognises that the brightest and most articulate people do not have all the answers. In fact a room left to its own devices will tend to work on less than 50% of the information and knowledge available. So the inescapable conclusion here is that the decisions are those where everyone has input.

The facilitator's skill here is especially key. They have to feel confident about getting everyone to contribute and one way they can do this is by getting people to work concurrently in separate groups on the same issue. This may feel slow but it ensures maximum involvement and, furthermore if each group reaches the same decision it confirms full team support.

Another key aspect of this consensus based approach is the way in which the facilitator helps the group to identify the future that they want to create. What this means in practice is getting people to articulate as powerfully as possible where they want to be. This is important because there are many more creative possibilities in the future that there are in the present. To paraphrase Einstein: 'You cannot solve problems with the same level of thinking that got you here.'

In this process of breakthrough thinking is the facilitator's role to listen to everything and remain neutral. People come into the room from many different viewing platforms, for example production, marketing, sales, maintenance, administration...and all see the world and the problems within it through their own lens. However it is the combination of all these perspectives which provides a whole view of the situation.

As Clive Lewis explains: "Providing a process that allows everyone's views to be heard is a fundamental part of the RapidConsensus process. This allows the group to work on the best information and knowledge available to them."

Speed and quality

Lewis also suggests that the speed of the process contributes directly to the quality of group decisions.

"We all have rapid cognition capability that works best under time pressure. The first intuitive response is most times better than a long drawn out analytical thinking process. As the room becomes a safe place to explore ideas the ability of the room to process complex information and make decisions speed up.

With speed the group will also start to experience lateral leaps in their working which typically characterise the creative process. Well facilitated groups surprise themselves with the speed with which they can collectively process information and make decisions. And experience has shown us that the quality of these decisions is high as continued progress is made after the workshop."

In essence the promise of RapidConsensus is that it helps teams to make good and fast decisions which everyone can get behind. And it does this by getting everyone to start together and talk together in the same room. As economic guru John Kay said: "Despite the internationalism of markets, despite air travel, despite information technology there are still things done best by people who find themselves in the same room". Lewis agrees. "The best dialogue comes when people stop hiding behind their roles and start talking on the same level. In this respect the process is based around the fundamentals of human interaction. Once people are comfortable with the process, once they stop and listen to one another and take in the different viewpoints of all people in the team it becomes apparent that wisdom can be found everywhere."

Why decision making is so hard!

- Analysis paralysis - People want too much information
- Holding on - People find it hard to let go of their pet solutions
- Blind acceptance - People don't ask enough hard questions
- Stressed out - People get anxious about getting it wrong
- Avoiding conflict - People think that disagreements are unproductive
- Failing to trust intuition - Sometimes we just know things but we fail to listen to ourselves