Don’t Dictate...Facilitate: How to Gain Consensus Without Being a Tyrant

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Do discussions you’re leading shut down when you’re hoping they will open up? Is one person always dominating meetings? Do team members not in agreement sabotage your efforts? Chances are you’re contributing to the meltdown. Here are a few reasons why team members crash and burn in team meetings.

The team leader talks too much. Lecturing leads to some of the lowest levels of learning and retention. People can easily tune out. According to adult learning research, adults want a sense of control. When the leader does most of the reporting or speaking, the team does not feel involved and will not buy into new ideas so readily. Sell, don’t tell.

Team members don’t listen. Even if the team leader is listening, others may not be. Is the role of the leader to facilitate the discussion so that others can be heard? Members may talk over one another, take credit for someone else’s idea, or discredit a person’s suggestions. These behaviors demonstrate a failure to listen. When people aren’t heard, they don’t feel respected. Without respect, the members won’t support each other.

One member dominates. This can happen when the team leader give one person the floor. More often, it’s a result of a strong personality with unmet needs. He or she can intimidate others. The challenge for the team leader is to meet the needs of the dominating person while encouraging others to contribute.

A facilitator orchestrates but does not take center stage. The focus is on the team. This requires a change of mindset. Many leaders fall back on lecturing, telling, and instructing instead of coordinating and facilitating. It’s easier to do what’s familiar. And some leaders believe to facilitate is to give up control.

Why facilitate? Team members feel heard and respected. This increases morale. More ideas are captured for greater innovation and productivity. Mistakes, glitches and weak strategies are identified, reducing costly errors. Leaders earn support and commitment when the team “owns” the idea. Finally, work is more fun when everybody feels important.

Good facilitators do the following:

Speak less and listen more. Be clear about your objective. If your objective is to get ideas from the group or to gain support for a new initiative, state the purpose, ask questions, and listen. To facilitate a meeting effectively, speak 20% of the time and listen 80% of the time.

Keep the discussion on track. Your job is to make sure that the major points are covered through discussion. A good facilitator preplans the time for each agenda item but is flexible enough to depart from the agenda. The challenge is to know when to rein in the discussion without turning people off. Facilitation is like fishing with a net. You let out the net far enough to catch the fish—the fish swim into the net.