Reducing Resistance to Change and Conflict: A Key to Successful Leadership

Article Two: Herding Cats – The Process of Organizational Decision Making

By Stephen Haslam and Robert Pennington, Ph.D., Resource International

This is the second in a series of articles that examines the essential role of a leader in reducing resistance to change, in order to promote growth in an organization. The first article explored basic models of change that show why resistance occurs (CBAM – the Concerns Based Adoption Model by Frances Fuller (Hall, et. al. 1972) and The Stages of Transition and the Four P’s of Transition by William Bridges and Susan Mitchell (Bridges & Mitchell 2000).

In addition to these broad models of change, decision making models are also needed that let people feel confident that their concerns will at least be factored into decisions, and know how it is appropriate and expected for them to express their disagreements with those in authority. This article presents the Consensus Style Decision Making Flowchart, not as a recommendation that all decisions should be made by consensus, but as a general process for reducing resistance in unanimous, consensus, majority, or authority decisions. Also presented is the Decision Making Grid, as a model for clarifying what role each person has in the decision making process, so that each person knows his or her Part in the Plan that will take the organization to it’s goal (Picture) (Bridges 2003).

Herding Cats

The process of making organizational decisions can sometimes feel like herding cats. Leaders know they need to get everyone moving toward the same vision and mission (Purpose and Picture [Bridges & Mitchell 2000]), but not matter how hard leaders try, some people end up going in different directions, while some just sit there doing nothing. While you don’t want blind obedience, you also don’t want anarchy and chaos. Leaders need to learn how to stimulate individual initiative, while maintaining a proper respect for the authority structure of the organization. This balancing act can be accomplished with a combination of carefully applied decision-making models, and ethical, respectful behavior on the part of the leaders.
Decision Making Models

How decisions are made
In 1969, E.H. Schein outlined a classification of methods of decision making in teams. He proposed the amount of public and private agreement with the decision that is likely to be associated with each classification. The same principles apply to teams of varying sizes.

“Plop” - Any single member can decide to attempt to influence others without support from others. He lays a “plop,” for both publicly and privately, all are aware of the failure to accept his decision. Sharing of ideas and feelings has been at a minimum.

Self-Authorization - A member fails to sense or is indifferent to the matter of support from others and authorizes himself to decide for the team. Only the member has accepted the decision. He ceases his self-authorization only when he becomes aware that the rest of the team has not accepted his decision.

Decision by Authority - An individual with formal authority takes it on himself to make the decision with little or no involvement of the other members of the team. This often results in team members not being aware of the decision and resenting it. Due to lack of member input these decisions can quite easily be made on an inadequate information base.

Hand-Clasping - A single member is able to gain a hand-clasping support from one other member. This may be perceived as general support for a decision by the whole team, but this is often a misconception. A team cannot build and grow if such decisions are made frequently.

Minority Decision - More overt conflict and pressure become apparent when a minority decides for the team. The difference between public and private acceptance becomes greater. The minority publicly accepts the decision. Some of the majority go along publicly but not privately. Although there may be a fair amount of sharing of resources and needs among the minority, the majority remains non-participating and, generally uncommitted. Apathy usually appears when the decision is to be carried out.

Majority Decision - There is more use of resources and more commitment when a majority decides. Many or all of the minority may go along publicly, but their satisfaction and private agreement with the decision are low.

Consensus - Consensus has been found to yield maximum commitment from all in the team. Issues are thrashed out until all feelings have been seriously considered before a decision is reached. Yet such consensus may be false if it is gained by announcing that “silence means consent” and when members refuse to reveal their true opinions about matters. Similarly, when members are forced to reveal their true opinions about matters, true consensus still has not been achieved. Only when everyone in the team freely offers his opinions and a decision is hammered out based on the public examination of all ideas is true consensus likely to be attained. (Schein 1969)

Consensus is a slower and more painful method than other decision making methods that have been described. Consequently, it is usually less efficient than those other methods in situations where they will suffice. The question then becomes – when do you make the effort to seek consensus? Consensus is the
only safe method for a decision where non-support or sabotage by a member or a minority would ruin the undertaking.

While not all decisions can or should be made by consensus, processes can be established to allow for maximum input for all participants. When this is done there will be less resistance when it is time to implement a decision. The following points outline the psychology behind a consensus approach as a process that reduces resistance to decisions.

If you take time, effort, and sincere interest to understand my concerns and link them to your solutions, I’ll have less need to defend my position.
If I don’t have to defend my position, I will be less aggressive toward you and your ideas.
If I am less defensive or aggressive, I will be less resistant to seeking alternatives.
If we actively seek alternatives, we will be more likely to find a solution we can all support.

John Kotter’s studies (Kotter, 1995) suggest that about 75 percent of the work force must accept the urgency (of a change) if the overall effort is to succeed. While this does not require “unanimous agreement,” it is the definition of consensus – a change we can live with and support.

The Challenges and Benefits of Consensus

The Consensus Style Decision Making Flowchart provides a process for such group interaction, showing the difference between four types of agreements: Unanimous, Consensus, Majority, Authority (Pennington, 1974). In a Unanimous Decision, all parties agree completely with all aspects of the decision. In a Consensus Decision, some members may have reservations about some aspects of the decision, but they openly agree to support the decision, and not to provide resistance that might sabotage its success. In a Majority Decision, the Majority is willing to accept the risk that resistance from a Minority, which disagrees with the decision, may cause problems. The Majority would then factor into the implementation of the decision contingency plans to handle the possible negative consequences of this resistance. To a certain extent, an Authority Decision is a “majority of one,” in which one Authority imposes a decision on others who may resist. Each successive category of decision faces an increasing risk of active or passive resistance that could inhibit successful implementation. This is the risk for which the leader or authority is primarily responsible.

The Flowchart emphasizes that a key element in reaching consensus (and thereby reducing resistance) is for the “majority” (or the authority) to focus on making the “minority” feel understood about its position. This minority might be a smaller number of people or a group with less authority in the organization.
When this is done, the minority might have important information or insights that can be incorporated into the discussion, thereby improving the overall quality of the decision and the support for it.

Key elements of a consensus decision include:

- Most of the participants agree to the proposal.
- Each person dissenting is asked to speak to his or her dissent.
- A sincere attempt is made to reconcile the dissent by the majority. Key elements are active listening and serious consideration of the dissent. Proposal carries only after all dissent has been clearly understood, which is defined by the dissenting members. This allows for the wisdom of the experience of the dissent to inform and modify the decision for the benefit of all.

However, too often the majority pressures the minority to “cave in” and go along with the group. When the majority is a larger group, the minority feels the peer pressure of wanting to fit into the group and not be the cause of conflict. With a “majority of one,” the authority figure may pressure the group to conform through fear of retaliation. Or the authority figure may have a history of listening outwardly to the group, and then doing whatever he or she wants to do.
When the “majority” does not take the care to understand the position of the minority, it makes an unconscious assumption – *Since we are the majority we must be right. Therefore we do not need to listen to the other position, we need to change their minds.* Consequently, the minority withholds valuable information or insights that may have helped define a more successful decision. The minority is then blamed for a lack of cooperation and support, which puts the minority in a no-win position. If they continue to put forward their viewpoint, they are told they are resisting and must change. If they stop “resisting” they are told they are withholding, and are the cause of any failure. They come to believe they are blamed for the failures, while the leaders are credited with any success. This can cause in a deep-rooted apathy in an organization, which can sabotage any leaders efforts.

**What Is My Part in the Decision?**

The Consensus Style Decision Making Flowchart allows for Unanimous Decisions, facilitates Consensus Decisions, and shows how to reach Majority or Authority Decisions (Authority = a majority of one) with a minimum of resistance. But not all decisions can be made by consensus, nor would anyone want that to be true. This flowchart should be used as a process, not necessarily as a specific model for producing a consensus decision, except in circumstances where consensus is an absolute requirement.

Therefore a model is needed to clarify what level of involvement each person has in the decision making process (Bridges & Mitchell’s “what’s my *Part*”), in relation to any issue. The Decision Making Grid is a model that can be used to clarify each person’s role in any decision making process.

It has already been stated that when people know what *Part* they play in a *Plan* that adequately addresses their concerns, they will contribute more to the good of the whole, and not spend so much time fighting with co-workers and management to protect their own needs.

**The common-sense logic behind using the Decision Making Grid**

People will use their power to support their needs. According to Sandra Ramey (in her study of university faculty governance), “Some facets of power identified are ‘personal power’, which is earned by experience and respect as a faculty member; and ‘position power’, which is implied’ by the authority given to that person’s title.” (Ramey, S.). If I don’t have control (*position power*), I must at least know that my needs and concerns are understood (*personal power*) (CBAM).
If I am uncertain whether my needs and concerns will be addressed, I may use my ‘personal power’ to reach beyond my position’s sphere of influence. This leads to gossip, cliques, and political power struggles, and inhibits open communication.

If I have confidence that leaders will take my concerns into consideration, I can openly give recommendations that reach beyond my ‘position power,’ and focus myself on the work that is within my sphere of influence.

The Decision Making Grid identifies six kinds of influences that a person might have on a decision. These include: [(Blank) -- May recommend or suggest, (I) Must be informed, (C) Must be consulted, (P) Must participate, (V) Veto power, (A) Authority to make decision] (Schmuck, et al., 1972). The Grid provides a procedure to clarify what influence each person would have in the various types of decisions that are made by the group, so that everyone knows what role he or she plays (position power).

This Decision Making Grid would not replace an organizational chart. It would not replace workflow processes. The Grid enhances these to clarify for each individual the ‘position power’ he or she has in the decision process. Such models are useful to guide leaders in building an atmosphere of inclusion in decision making, while still creating a clear chain of command that produces timely results.

Case Study: Decision Making Grid

An educational organization put together a diverse team of specialists to develop training programs. This team included an Educator (Educ), a school administrator (Admin), a script writer (Writer), and the team leader (Lead) who was also the company’s Educational Department Director with authority over the team (position power).

The Writer wrote a first draft, others added their input, and then they would meet to discuss and edit. The process was confusing at first because different people had different objectives, and different areas of specialty that they wanted emphasized. Therefore it took a long time to produce a product.

The team agreed to create a Decision-Making Grid to clarify each person’s involvement at each stage in the development of the product. A work process chart showed each stage in the process of creating the educational material, from outlining objectives to writing first drafts, to editing for various factors as age and school appropriateness, and finally for grammar.
Educational Team’s Decision-Making Grid

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<tr>
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<th>Lead</th>
<th>Admin</th>
<th>Educ</th>
<th>Writer</th>
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<td>A</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>V</td>
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<tr>
<td>1st Draft</td>
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<td>V</td>
<td>A</td>
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<td>Age</td>
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<td>A</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>I</td>
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<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>C</td>
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<td>C</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>C</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grammar</td>
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<td>___</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

[(Blank) -- May recommend or suggest, (I) Must be informed, (C) Must be consulted, (P) Must participate, (V) Veto power, (A) Authority to make decision]

The team agreed to seek consensus on development of the program content, while still recognizing the degrees of influence outlined in the Grid. For example, the Writer wrote the first draft (A) with suggestions from others (C), and had the final say (A) with the models or techniques being used. When discussion focused around issues of school appropriateness, the Writer and Educator could give suggestions (C), but Admin had the final decision (A) in a disagreement – however, the Lead could require further discussion (V). Each person had authority in his or her area of specialty, and they agreed on an approach that sought consensus. This structure greatly facilitated the team’s ability to communicate, resulting in faster product development.

But any model can be sabotaged by an authority figure who ultimately defines what role anyone plays in decisions. Arguments eventually arose in the editing meetings. Often, when the Team Lead disagreed, the conversation would go back and forth until the Lead said, “I guess we will have to agree to disagree.” The other team members eventually learned that when this was said, the Department Director’s position power would override whatever influence they had written in the Grid. They learned that, in practice, no one truly had an (A) or even a (V) except the Lead. Eventually the team members did not offer opposing opinions freely, knowing that their input would not be included. The products were still produced, but team members withheld creative input.

This demonstrates the risk that an authority figure takes in the consensus process by imposing an authority decision, even if he or she thinks that decision is right. Employees learn to withhold their input, because their effort will not produce results. Even the legendary Konosuke Matsushita once told a section chief, “Only about 40 percent of the decisions I approve are ones I really agree with; the other 60 percent I have reservations about but I okay them anyway. . . I think a person in charge of others has to okay some things he doesn't really like. It is still possible
to see that necessary adjustments are made over the long run."
(Matsushita)

The training team in this case study had each person’s “influence” clearly
defined at every step of the product development. The team agreed in
principle to seek consensus, to make sure that each person felt
completely understood and free to express, and that each person’s
expertise received the proper level of influence in decisions. But the
leader was uncomfortable in situations where people with strong
convictions entered spirited discussions. She ended them quickly by
“agreeing to disagree,” and then used her *position power* to avoid the
discomfort.

This example shows that all the organizational structure in the world will
not overcome the negative personal power of a leader who is not able to
build an atmosphere in which it is safe to disagree.

Building an atmosphere in which it is safe to disagree

Even if the decision-making structure is clear, resistance could emerge from
ineffective uses of *personal power*. This may include unresolved disagreements
or misunderstandings, personality clashes between individuals, favoritism, or
from the fear of dealing directly with conflict. Most of these misuses of *personal
power* are perceived as disrespectful behaviors.

While leaders do need to give attention to the organizational structures
that establish *position power*, they must also give attention to the
organizational cultures that influence *personal power*. In her study of
academic leadership, Adriana Kezar observes that most studies “focused
almost exclusively on structural theories and to a lesser extent on political
theories,” and that the “human dynamics have remained under-
investigated.” According to Kezar, “Human relations, cultural, and social
cognition theories remain underutilized theoretical frameworks in the study
of (faculty) governance, especially for exploring human conditions that
affect governance” (Kezar, 2002).

According to John Bennett, relational power “involves the authority that
others bestow upon the leader when he or she genuinely consults and
freely communicates with them” (Bennett, 2001). When used
appropriately, this relational power, akin to Ramey and Lucas’s *personal
power*, is less likely than *position power* to meet resistance, because the
latter is imposed while the former is earned and freely given. But when misused, the result is that people feel misunderstood and disrespected.

In order to encourage everyone to productively use their personal power in the decision making process, (and to avoid the various destructive uses of personal power) leaders must build an atmosphere of respect that leads to trust. To do this, leaders must also practice these principles in one-on-one communication and problem solving with everyone, and must establish common methods by which people can resolve their misunderstandings and disagreements respectfully.

Rosabeth Moss-Kantor points out the importance of building trust at all levels of the organization:

“Many alliances unravel because, while there is support at the top of the organization, departments at lower levels are left to resolve tensions, answer questions, or fill gaps on their own. The conflicts and wasted efforts can end up destroying value instead of creating it. You have to make sure that the goals of people at many levels of the organizations are aligned, and that people get to know each other, before you can expect them to build trust.” (Moss-Kantor, 1999)

But how can people feel free to express their concerns if a leader acts defensively when faced with conflicts, and discourages disagreement and dissent? One of the barriers to effective leadership identified by Frances Hesselbein, president and CEO of the Drucker Foundation, is the practice of killing the messenger (Hesselbein 2002). In many organizations, people who disagree with the leadership are not considered “team players.” If one agrees with the leaders one is considered to have a positive team attitude, and will more likely grow into positions of leadership. While this may appear to be a problem of rigid organizational structure that does not allow input from lower levels, it is actually an organizational culture issue caused by inappropriate use of personal power. The organizational structure may provide for channels of communication, but the people in those positions inhibit the free flow of information.

In his excellent article on The Trouble with Teamwork, Patrick Lencioni explains why trust is so essential, and how it can only develop in an atmosphere in which it is safe to disagree.

“The first and most important step in building a cohesive and functional team is the establishment of trust. But not just any kind of trust. Teamwork must be built upon a solid foundation of vulnerability-based trust. This means that members of a cohesive, functional team must learn to comfortably and quickly acknowledge, without provocation, their mistakes,
weaknesses, failures, and needs for help. They must also readily recognize the strengths of others, even when those strengths exceed their own. . . . Showing vulnerability is unnatural for many leaders, who were raised to project strength and confidence in the face of difficulty.

“There is a very practical reason why vulnerability-based trust is indispensable. Without it, a team will not, and probably should not, engage in unfiltered productive conflict.

“What CEOs and their teams must do is learn to identify artificial harmony when they see it, and incite productive conflict in its place. This is a messy process, one that takes time to master. But there is no avoiding it, because to do so makes it next to impossible for a team to make real commitment.

“Teams that fail to disagree and exchange unfiltered opinions are the ones that find themselves revisiting the same issues again and again. All this is ironic, because the teams that appear to an outside observer to be the most dysfunctional (the arguers) are usually the ones that can arrive at and stick with a difficult decision.” (Lencioni 2003)

As Lencioni proposes, it can be messy and time consuming to facilitate productive conflict. And it is easier said than done. Leaders need communication tools to develop this art, and to establish norms within the organization so that others feel safe that these norms will be followed to support them when they have a concern to express.

However, these authors have known many people who are skillfully proficient with a variety of listening and negotiation techniques, but who do not build working relationships of trust and mutual cooperation. So, before exploring specific communication techniques and models, we will examine the relationship between two fundamental keys that must exist in any group before communication skills can be used effectively. These are the keys of understanding and respect.