



CAN EVERYBODY WIN AN ARGUMENT?

BY MICHAEL O'BRIEN

Recently, I was coaching a CEO who was lamenting the amount of time she was spending “selling” major decisions to her executive team and then motivating them to implement her initiatives.

As we began to unpack her frustration, I discovered that she was finding it easier to make difficult strategic decisions alone, without formal input from her senior team. When quizzed about making such decisions in isolation, she replied that involving others usually resulted in stubborn arguments that divided her team with clear winners and losers. She felt that winning the argument had actually become more important to some than doing what was best for the company.

Because of her engaging personality, she found it easier to make the rounds of her executive team, explaining and justifying her decisions to get everyone on board, rather than deal with the personal, confrontational battles that had previously erupted among her senior team. However, she had lost perspective on the fact that often the best decisions are made when all points of view can be engaged, examined, and discussed in an environment that removes fear and anger from the conversation and replaces them with curiosity and empathy—two of the building blocks of real dialogue.

The Debating Game

In a healthy environment, arguments are very helpful; they serve to pull people together and get them moving in the same direction. The key is having an argument that everyone can win. For this CEO, we staged a debate around a particular strategic decision that she was about to make; one that she was prepared to make alone. But we threw in a few twists

that kept the discussions lively, productive, and fun.

I remembered reading how President Ronald Reagan handled debates at the White House. In many cases, he would assign those most passionate about one side of the issue to actually argue the opposite viewpoint.

So, we staged a debate around the specifics of the decision. And, like President Reagan, we assigned executives to each side of the issue, based upon their knowledge and passion for the opposing argument. It turned out brilliantly.

As the debate unfolded, we found that the negative emotions and personal attacks that usually characterize passionate arguments didn't materialize, but in their place was humor, creativity, and most important of all, some really great thinking on both sides as the participants worked to understand, adopt, and defend a new position.

Because participants viewed the debate as more of a game than a formal presentation (of the kind they were accustomed to making to defend their view of an issue), they approached it on a more objective level. The result was that each side of the issue had a voice that provided thoughtful examination and advocacy.

This exercise was so thought provoking and useful that the CEO surprised everyone by calling for a straw vote at the conclusion of the debate and making the decision on the spot.

Afterward, several members of the executive team told me that the debate had helped them see a side of the issue that they had not considered before, which influenced their vote. The CEO was able to get the best thinking and perspective from her executive team, while also making them comfortable with all of the issues involved. Then, when the

decision was made, there was both intellectual understanding and emotional belief in the reasoning behind the decision.

Empathy: Holding Another's View as Your Own

Because the exercise required people to adopt the contrary viewpoint, they were free to bring their intelligence—both cognitive and emotional—to the table, resulting in an environment where all sides of the issue could be weighed and examined, without the fear of being wrong that causes discomfort in so many leaders.

It is this ability to hold someone else's viewpoint as your own that fosters real conversation and breakthrough thinking. Whereas previously the CEO would have made the decision in isolation or after talking with a few members of the team, and later would have spent an enormous amount of time explaining her decision and coercing others to implement it, the lasting empathy this exercise developed ensured that her senior team was in alignment, making execution that much faster and more effective.

The next time you face a strategic decision, try staging a debate to release new energy, creativity, and excitement around the decision and speed up its adoption and ultimate success. ■

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