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DEEP RELATIONSHIPS. ENDURING LEGACIES.

The “C Word”

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“A camel is a horse designed by a committee.” Sir Alec Issigonis

Not long ago a consultant friend of mine discussed referring a company to me for organizational development. He asked me to describe how I would approach the client’s issues that involved both team and leadership development. I attempted to explain my approach, and when I got to the part where I help the client learn and practice strategic use of consensus, he stopped me and told me that he was opposed to the use of consensus. I asked him why he felt that way, and he said that he had seen too many things go wrong and could not see where it would ever be beneficial to an organization. He did say that he thinks collaboration is useful- but never consensus.

Although I have now worked with hundreds of teams and have seen strategic use of the consensus process effectively transform the productivity of teams and leaders, I have actually heard this so many times I am not surprised anymore. I have been curious, however, as to why this perception is so prevalent.

Consensus and collaboration are similar concepts. Collaboration, by definition means that two or more parties contribute input, time, and resources to come to conclusions that are of mutual benefit or towards a greater good for both parties. Consensus, by contrast, is a process by which two or more individuals work to make a decision that achieves a “win-win” solution.

Consensus is a more formalized process that moves people to a solution that everyone feels is the best possible answer given the data, and that everyone can buy into. Consensus, if done correctly, can have many benefits for both families and teams that need to make decisions together. For the purposes of this article, I will usually refer to “teams” as the groups utilizing the consensus process, although I have seen lots of benefit in building the family decision makers in a family business into a team, as the same principle is in effect.

The benefits of consensus can basically be found in three areas: better decision quality, higher buy-in and follow through, and development of members. The first, better decision quality, is the one that most people think of. If done correctly, a team utilizing the consensus process can outperform its smartest member on any particular subject. In fact, well-trained teams utilizing this process have actually been seen to out perform an expert coming in from the outside in terms of coming up with a solution.

The second area of benefit, better follow through and buy in, is actually the one that usually shows the greatest financial return for the time invested in the process. So much money and time is lost in organizations when members either do not understand what the decision is that has been made or inevitably sabotage it by not following through. Effective use of consensus in a team or family nearly always eliminates the "I told you so" factor.

The other benefit seen by the process is the development of the individual members. There is a vast difference in engagement and thinking if you are asked to work together with your colleagues to come up with the best answer versus being told to carry out a decision that has already been made.

Strategic use of consensus by families and teams in business actually lays the groundwork for effective succession development as it requires each member to think and act with initiation and engagement as if they were an owner. In comparing the decision making methods of telling a team the decision and asking it to carry it out, asking the team to give input to the leader who then makes the decision, voting and going with the majority, and utilizing a consensus process, consensus is the only one that has the above described benefits.

So why has consensus become such a dirty word? After listening to many horror stories about people's experiences with consensus, I have come to the conclusion that the difficulty is usually with the misuse of the concept. Here is what I see as the key areas of misuse and misunderstanding:

- **Overuse.** This is usually the result of some seminar that a team leader or member attended where they saw consensus used and saw valuable results- often the team being more productive than any one member could achieve on their own. They return to their team and want to make every decision this way. The consensus process takes a fair amount of time to practice correctly, and it is not appropriate for every decision. It will actually become very dysfunctional very fast and burn out your team fairly quickly if it is overused. This is also not a good use of time, as many decisions should be delegated.
- **Misunderstanding about the very essence of consensus.** The consensus process has many favorable outcomes, and at the center of these is that it

protects the minority position that may have key data that can get the team to the best answer solution. If the process becomes one where the group “gangs up” on dissenting members to sway them over to their side, the crucial information may be lost, and the group may as well have voted instead. This will not only diminish the quality of the decision, but impact the morale of members as they do not feel any more heard than if they had been told what to do and not ever asked for their input.

- Believing you must be able to die by the decision. Many groups who are beginning to work on making consensus decisions experience the phenomenon of members who argue their point and will not work towards the best answer as if their very life depended on their particular stance on the issue. Coming to a consensus decision does not mean you are willing to die by the decision- it simply means that you can live with it, and believe that the team has explored the data sufficiently and has come to the best answer possible.
- Not having enough training. Consensus is a straightforward enough process to learn, but actually must have the right variables in place for it to work effectively. First of all, there needs to be high trust and a high level of communication skill use. Trust is the number one predictor of how accurately one member will hear what another member is saying. Teams where there is low trust will have a very difficult time reaching consensus decisions. Secondly, teams need to have norms of communication that promote reaching a best answer solution. These include: taking risks to share hunches, ask questions, summarize the data, poll the group on where they are, and flagging issues that are derailers to coming to a conclusion. Finally, the team needs to have training in how to effectively make proposals and run a survey process that results in a decision. This is not a difficult process to learn, but does take proper training to be effective.

Under the right set of circumstances, strategic use of consensus can be very beneficial to team and organizational effectiveness and productivity. It can also develop leadership, and assist in identifying key talent for the next generation. It must be used correctly however, and does require a high degree of trust within the team to be effective. It also requires that the key decision makers are willing to take the risk to share power and invest the time in training and development. It also typically takes the assistance of a third party to both facilitate the development of trust and provide the proper training in the process.

Interestingly enough, I have never had a team (either the family or corporate type) to either abandon the use of consensus or declare it to be a failure or waste of time after they have taken the time to master it. Many can point to other benefits as well such as reduced stress in the workplace, lower turnover, and having a work culture that is able to respond quickly to changes in the marketplace and make adjustments with new data.