

MAKE MEETINGS MATTER

This gives an instant reading on where everybody stands, with degrees of difference. The discussion can then turn to addressing the concerns of those indicating zero to two fingers, turning next to the “three’s” while making sure the people showing four to five fingers remain supportive. Indeed, they may be able to convince others of their reasoning.

If nearly everyone is showing three or fewer fingers, the idea or decision probably doesn’t have a chance. When everyone is showing four or five, then it’s time to ask the “live with and support” questions and declare modified consensus.

AVOID GROUPTHINK

Beware of “groupthink” when attempting to build consensus. Groupthink usually happens when one or a few vocal members are highly persuasive or assertive in pushing for their ideas and points of view, making it somewhat intimidating for less expressive people to voice concerns. As a result, they may “cave in” and go along with the group, even when they have concerns.

Groupthink can also happen when group members are insulated from the realities of the organization, such as boards or executive committees who are not in touch with what is happening at the operating level. They may be unaware of their blindsides. The “emperor’s new clothes” version of groupthink is reinforced when underlings are too intimidated to question the boss’ decision or point out its flaws.

Originally labeled by psychologist Irving L. Janis, groupthink can also happen in groups that have been meeting throughout a period of time without entertaining diverse viewpoints. Long meetings may also produce “same old” groupthink; everyone wants to go home, so decisions may be rushed. Similarly, when groups are under pressure to make a decision, members may bypass their usual assessment criteria, for the sake of group harmony. The risk of groupthink is that less than optimum solutions are reached because of the lack of critical evaluation—all points of view are not heard.

Consensus

To avoid groupthink, give consideration to the following:

- ⇒ Welcome diversity in your group. Invite people from other departments, people who are known to have different viewpoints from your own, and people who will be affected by the decisions your group will make.
- ⇒ The initiator (boss, committee head) sets the tone for divergent viewpoints. Participants must feel safe in expressing their reservations, instead of just saying what the boss wants to hear. A group that has no conflict may fall victim to groupthink.
- ⇒ If the group reaches a decision too quickly or without vigorous discussion, consider delaying making it until everyone has a chance to think it over. This might also allow time for more research or data gathering to support the decision.
- ⇒ Seek the opinions of others in the organization before making a final decision. Tell them what you are considering, and why you think it will work. Listen carefully for input and suggestions to make your proposal stronger.

RIGHT PEOPLE/CLEAR LEVEL OF AUTHORITY

There are few things more demoralizing than to have a higher-up shoot down a group's decision after the meeting. Of course, senior executives and managers always reserve the prerogative to make final decisions. The trouble comes when the group is told they are empowered to decide (or thinks they are), when in fact that is not the case.

If the senior person has a strong point of view on an issue, then he or she is obligated to share that with the group, preferably by showing up at the meeting and fully participating. If you initiate a meeting to get ideas or feedback from people, it is important to be very clear about your intentions.