

**Sometimes, agreement is the greatest obstacle to real progress. Generative thinking reveals opportunities for and enables the practice of constructive debate.**

# Would Someone Please *Dissent?*

**by Jim Woods**

In a meeting with one of his top committees, Alfred P. Sloan, legendary CEO of General Motors, led his team in a discussion of an issue that we can assume carried some significance. As the conversation wrapped up, Sloan said, “Gentlemen, I take it we are all in complete agreement on the decision here.” Everyone nodded.

“Then,” he continued, “I propose we postpone further discussion of this matter until our next meeting to give ourselves time to develop disagreement and perhaps gain some understanding of what the decision is all about.”

Develop *disagreement*? It would seem that unanimous agreement would be the ultimate confirmation of a decision. Not so, said Peter Drucker in his 1966 book, *The Effective Executive*:

*Decisions of the kind the executive has to make are not made well by acclamation. They are made well only if based on the clash of conflicting views, the dialogue between different points of view, the choice between different judgments. The first rule in decision-making is that one does not make a decision unless there is disagreement.<sup>1</sup>*

Organizational behavior experts, including Jim Collins, Patrick Lencioni, and others, have long claimed that constructive conflict is *essential* for gaining commitment to action, and most importantly, for arriving at the right decision. Encouraging vigorous debate, however difficult, is essential.

So why do we avoid debate? Is it surprising that a generation of people taught to “get along” finds it difficult to passionately disagree about ideas and concepts? Many leaders and team members try to protect the feelings of participants by cutting confrontation short. Team members are sometimes reluctant to voice strong opinions for fear that their supervisor or contem-

poraries will resent the challenge to their positions. Thus, to protect the feelings of others, confrontation is cut short.

In fact, this behavior increases tension because it keeps issues of conflict from coming to the surface for resolution. As a result, conflict plays out behind the scenes, often with very harmful repercussions to the organization. Furthermore, the team limits its ability to develop the best solutions when viable options are suppressed.

Ideological debate – debate around concepts and ideas – is different from personality-focused attacks on someone holding a different point of view. To the casual observer, both kinds of conflict are filled with passion, emotion, and frustration. However, healthy teams focus on what is being presented rather than who is presenting. These teams arrive at decisions more quickly and move forward more collaboratively than those who are unable to isolate personal feelings from the debate.

The leader's role in this process is to ensure that every team member has the opportunity to weigh in on the ideas being discussed and that personalities are taken out of the discussion. Again, the important thing is what, not who. Team members

are obligated to passionately advocate their point of view while listening and trying to understand those who have a different perspective.

This takes time, and it can be challenging. Despite the difficulties, teams must have the discipline to refrain from charging into problem solving too quickly. Productive conflict must be given time to develop, and the key to understanding why lies in a process called generative thinking.

### Generative Thinking

Generative thinking is described in *Governance as Leadership* (Chait, Ryan and Taylor) as the process that provides us with a sense of problems and opportunities. It precedes activities such as mission setting, strategy development and problem solving.<sup>2</sup>

Generative thinking consists of three steps: cues and clues collection, frame selection, and retrospective reflection. We tend to subconsciously make decisions this way already, but identifying and understanding the process helps to leverage our tendencies and create constructive conflict, leading to better decisions for our organizations.

### Noticing the Cues and Clues

When faced with problems and opportunities, people make sense of the situation by seeing or emphasizing only some of the countless stimuli competing for their attention. Their choice of stimuli is influenced by their experience which conditions them to pay attention to certain variables while ignoring others. Research indicates that, to some extent, these tendencies are hardwired in us when we are young (see sidebar). At a very young age, we learn to ignore some stimuli and focus on what we deem important. Consequently, as adults, we are somewhat naturally restricted in the way we perceive the world.

It's this limited vision, as it were, that explains the power of a healthy team. Rather than operating individually, a team blends the perspectives of many to collectively widen the scope of vision. Eliciting a sense of reality from as many different perspectives as possible enhances the ability of the team to see the reality of their present situation and to confront the issue as it is.

Leaders of organizations must therefore encourage debate within the leadership team to ensure that the maximum number of cues and clues surface, providing as many possible versions of reality as possible. Truth, not consensus, is the goal. To get there, the question should not be, "Does everyone agree?" but "Who can give me disagreement?"

Team members must be open to differing view points, understanding that their personal biases and their professional training can inhibit their ability to see all the possibilities for their present reality. Alfred P. Sloan understood this. If nobody disagrees on a major decision, then teams must find a way to generate disagreement, whether that means deliberately defending the other side or bringing in new team members with different perspectives.

Before even discussing solutions, teams must be certain that

### How We Are Wired

The first years of our lives are primarily spent absorbing information about our environment. Research has shown that by the time we are three years old, our brains have formed 15,000 synaptic connections between each of the hundred billion neurons present. That's fifteen hundred trillion connections.

Once we start trying to organize this information, we shut down some of the noise in our heads to avoid sensory overload. Thus, during the next twelve years, approximately half of the neural network will atrophy. Since it is nearly impossible to rebuild lost connections, our mental network is mostly frozen by the time we are in our mid-teens.

This is not as bad as it sounds, however. Research indicates that intelligence and effectiveness are not a result of the number of neural networks, but rather the strength of the best neural connections. Our brains shut down billions of connections so we can focus on exploiting the strongest ones.

This is the physiological process behind what we see as unique perspectives among individuals. Our neural networks also act as filters, causing us to focus on some stimuli while ignoring others. This is why healthy teamwork is so powerful. Considering others' perspectives can help us break out of our own mold in the pursuit to understand reality as it is.

Adapted from *Now, Discover Your Strengths* (Chapter 2) by Marcus Buckingham

they have considered all the cues and clues, because it is out of the cues and clues that the subject at hand is framed.

### Choosing and Using Frames

To organize the raw cues and clues, we construct *frames*. Again, this process is somewhat inherent. We draw upon our experience and training to bring order to the chaos. For example, a lawyer looks at a problem from a legal perspective, while an engineer immediately begins to analyze the technical ramifications. Frames are often based on our temperament, as when one person sees an obstacle while another sees an opportunity. Most importantly, frames reorganize information into recognizable patterns, aiding our understanding and helping us to form a plan of action.

As an illustration, suppose an organization is facing high employee turnover. The human resources manager posits that employees feel frustrated by a perceived lack of opportunity for personal growth in their current positions. From this framework, he advocates a solution to the problem that includes increasing cross-training of jobs, offering incentives for employees to attend the local community college, and training all managers in employee development.

The CFO counters that the real reason employees are leaving is wages that are five percent lower, on average, than a cross-town competitor. He also claims the benefit package is uncompetitive within the industry. From this framework, she recommends an across-the-board wage increase and improved “cafeteria style” benefit package.

In both cases, professional training has highlighted different clues for each executive. These clues construct the frames through which they see the issue. Both plans, therefore, are logical outgrowths of the way their proponents framed the issue. So which is the right course of action? Is either plan the real solution? The other executives on the team almost certainly have their own view of what should be done. Can the organization afford to make a misstep here?

The first person to frame an issue is in a powerful position. By establishing the framework for the team, they’re able to limit the ways others see the problem. We see this demonstrated in political campaigns, where each candidate rushes to be first to frame an issue, thereby forcing the other candidate to debate the issue from their preselected frame of reference. Organizational theorist Jeffery Pfeffer has noted that establishing “the framework within which issues will be viewed and decided is often tantamount to determining the result.”<sup>3</sup>

With this in mind, establishing the correct frame at the outset is paramount to making good decisions. The CEO must mine for all cues and clues before a collective framework is established. Therefore, vigorous debate around the possible frames must ensue before this can happen. If the debate does not happen naturally, the leader must stir the pot, forcing dialogue and encouraging dissenting viewpoints to ensure that all possibilities are presented. Only after team members have considered

perspectives outside of their own frame of reference can the group attempt to establish a cohesive framework that correlates to the reality of the situation at hand.

Probing assumptions, testing theories and passionately debating the frames are critical in leveraging the collective intelligence of the team and ultimately choosing the best possible

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course of action. If the leader feels that the team has bypassed this step too quickly, he must resist the urge to bask in the seeming efficiency of a quick consensus. Like Sloan, he must be willing to stop the process until productive conflict materializes.

Once the frame is established, the team can finally develop a plan of action with confidence.

### Thinking Retrospectively

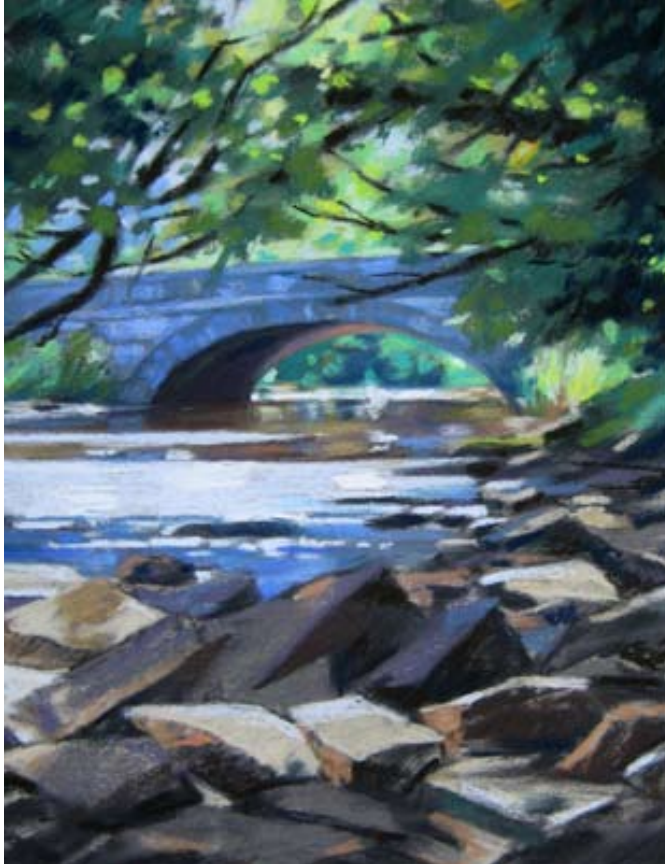
Paradoxically, people make sense of the future through the lens of the past. Our sense of what works, as manifested by our frames, reflects our experience.

In *The Change Masters: Innovation and Entrepreneurship in the American Corporation*, Rosabeth Kanter writes:

*When innovators begin to define a project...they are not only seeing what is possible; they are learning about the past, and one of the prime uses of the past is in the construction of a story that makes the future grow naturally out of it in terms compatible with the organization's culture.<sup>4</sup>*

Once the new plan is established, it should be tested against a *future* narrative. Does the proposed action sound realistic when discussed as if it were a *fait accompli* at some point in the future? Does it fit with the organization’s core values? Note that while we can interpret the past in different ways, we do not have license to revise history to fit the future narrative. Leadership teams must discuss their sense of organizational history – another opportunity for productive conflict – and construct a dominant narrative consistent with the organization’s core ideology.

If the plan fails to meet this test, it must be reconsidered. Again, the temptation here is to move forward. After struggling through the dissension involved in clues collection and frame selection, teams are weary and prone to just make a decision and be done with it. However, too much hard work has been invested to be wasted on a decision inconsistent with the organization’s values and purpose. A disciplined team will continue to provoke dissension until a comprehensive solution can be reached that works when tested against the envisioned future.



Louisville Blues (Jill Stefani Wagner)

### A Real World Example

The danger of cutting off debate and allowing an issue to be framed too quickly and unchallenged was made clear to me during an annual offsite retreat for our senior management team.

We were discussing ways to increase revenue in our parts production business unit. This business unit had found a niche as a leader in powdered metal turning, but it was constrained from growing revenue by the size of that market and the technological advances being made in near net forging, which required reduced machining.

One team member proposed that by entering into more high-volume commodity parts production, the unit could grow the top line, improve cash flow, and cover the group's overhead, enabling the specialty machining projects to be more profitable.

Our team quickly accepted this vision of reality and began implementing the plan. We had moved on to potential products, customers, and economies of scale issues when our newly hired CFO voiced an objection. He shared how, earlier in his career, he worked for a manufacturer in a similar business that tried our approach. He pointed out that many of these types of jobs were constantly under price pressure from competitors and customers. One could be trapped into always meeting the lowest price, thereby eroding already thin margins, because not doing so could result in losing the job altogether and jeopardizing the capital investment already sunk into the job.

Furthermore, the likelihood of hiccups in delivery schedules, both in receiving raw material and in shipping finished product, presented significant dangers. Any quality mishaps would prove catastrophic to the razor thin margins associated with the job.

We debated each if these issues and attempted to square our perceptions to this new version of reality. Finally, we asked how entering this new type of market was consistent with the core competencies of the organization – one that drew success from innovation and finding unique solutions for challenges in manufacturing. We realized that this type of business did not fit the narrative of how our company became successful. A better approach for us was to focus on opportunities where we could provide innovative solutions for our customers' needs.

Our willingness, after prodding from the CFO, to rethink our frames and reengage in productive conflict was the trigger to a sounder decision. Alfred Sloan would have been proud!

### Conclusion

Leveraging the natural process of generative thinking to make sound decisions requires a disciplined willingness to engage in productive conflict. In *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, Patrick Lencioni calls on organizational leaders to “mine for conflict” to bring all cues and frames to the forefront. Teams must continually question assumptions and probe the feasibility of differing plans. They must be comfortable passionately debating the correct sense of reality and the proper course of action, all the while remembering that the debate is about ideas, not the people espousing the ideas.

Organizations that diligently seek clarity around their current situation, rigorously debate all possible courses of action, and test their actions against the organization's culture and history stand a greater chance of making sound decisions.



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#### End Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Drucker, P. (1966) *The Effective Executive*. Harper and Row Publishing.

<sup>2</sup> Chait, R.; Ryan, W.; and Taylor B. (2005) *Governance as Leadership*. John Wiley and Sons.

<sup>3</sup> Pfeffer, J. (1992) *Managing with Power: Politics and Influence in Organizations*. Harvard Business School Press.

<sup>4</sup> Kanter, R. (1983) *The Change Masters: Innovation and Entrepreneurship in the American Corporation*. Simon and Shuster, Inc.

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