

# SMALL Business Times

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## Make it so

### How to move dialogue into action

#### Question:

**In our company, it seems whenever we engage in a negotiation, we never really make a decision. Everyone leaves feeling like we had a good discussion, but nothing happens. How do we move our dialogue into action?**

#### Answer:

Recognizing that dialogue is not decision-making is a good first step. With sensitive conversations, the two most difficult stages are the beginning and the end.

The beginning is risky because, until a feeling of safety is created, people will not open up and speak candidly. The end is tricky because if you are not clear about how to clarify the conclusion, you set up unrealistic expectations and, ultimately, you risk having team members feel violated.

To avoid that situation, be clear on how decisions will be made. For example, during a meeting the sales manager met with company leaders to discuss how to increase sales. It was agreed that selected sales team members take on new responsibilities for making outbound call calls.

A month later, after reviewing the pipeline numbers, the company president stormed into the sales manager's office and very seriously asked, "Do we have the right people or do we need to replace this sales team?"

Shocked, the sales manager proceeded to ask questions until he discovered the trigger behind the attack. Outbound cold calls had not increased over that 30-day period.

While the sales manager agreed that selected sales team members would take on the responsibility for making cold calls, his game plan involved preparing them for the new responsibility. That involved script-writ-

ing, training and practice until they gained the confidence to project well over the phone. The president expected the increased call activity to begin immediately.

So while they agreed in principle to the change, they did not agree to a timeline when it would take place.

#### Separate dialogue from decision-making

Before a decision is made, define how the decision process will work. Distinguish between the dialogue and decision-making process.

Dialogue is the process for getting all relevant input on the table from everyone involved. Just because they are involved with the dialogue doesn't mean they are guaranteed to take part in any, or all, of the decision process. Early on, people need to know who will be involved in the decision making process and why.

#### Define the line of authority

There are times when you are in an authority position and you exclusively decide the decision-making method that will be used. Managers, parents and school superintendents are leadership-style examples.

There are many times when it is appropriate to involve or even turn the decision process over to an employee. For example, asking an employee to select the supplier he or she will work with on a project is a good investment of the person's time, once guidelines are established.

#### When the line of authority isn't clear

There are times when co-workers come together to address an issue they all have in common. Because you are equals, it is difficult to decide who will make the decision. In situations like this, all of the participants need to come to an agreement about how the final decision will be made. If you don't openly talk

about who decides and why, and you end up with diverse opinions, you're likely to wind up in a heated battle.

#### Four methods for decision-making

There are four common ways for making decisions: command, consult, vote and consensus. Each option represents a different degree of involvement. It is best to choose the one that makes the most sense based on the unique circumstances and desired outcomes.

**Command** – Consistent with military operations, command decisions are made with no involvement from others. This can happen in one of two ways: someone takes control and makes a unilateral decision, or the decision is handed to someone because the group does not want to make the decision. The group may still take responsibility for the implementation.

**Consult** – Consulting is the process of inviting others to educate, inform and influence the decision-maker before he or she makes a decision. Consulting can be an effective way to gather critical information from many stakeholders or subject matter experts without giving your decision making power to others.

During those discussions, it's important to be clear at the beginning that you are in data-collection mode. That means that the employee's input will be taken into consideration, but it doesn't mean you will take action on the suggestion.

People often believe that when they are asked to share their ideas, they are entitled to have a say in the final decision. That can create unnecessary resentment. Be clear in stating your purpose and intent for your meeting.

**Vote** – When efficiency is the highest value, voting is a great option. A vote decision is recommended when time is of the essence and team members support the fact that they may not get their first choice. Voting is best utilized after good options have been presented and reviewed. If team members are angry

or do not agree with the decision, consensus should then be used.

**Consensus** – Consensus is the process of engaging in dialogue until everyone honestly agrees to one decision. It generates a high level of agreement. That can be both a blessing and a curse. The blessing is that there is uniform support and ownership. The curse is that it may take days, months or years to reach consensus.

The consensus approach should be used when the stakes are high and the issues complex or when the issue requires full support from every participating member.

## How to decide

There are four questions you can ask yourself when determining which method is the best option.

**1. Who has a stake?** Determine who wants to be involved with the decision-making process, including those who will be affected. These players are your candidates for involvement.

**2. Who should be consulted?** Who has the expertise, experience base or resources you need to make the best decision? Assess the impact of the involvement of those persons. Encourage them to be a part of the process if they bring new information, insights or a process for resolving the issue.

**3. Who must agree?** Based upon

the decision, who must cooperate with you or with other players? Is it to everyone's advantage to involve those persons upfront in the process rather than at the end? Typically, people do not like to be surprised. And they don't like inheriting decisions other people made for them. Will involving them in the process eliminate any unnecessary resistance?

**4. How many people is it worth involving?** I think we all agree that it is best to involve the fewest number of people possible. You must find a balance between what will help you achieve the best quality decision and with the best level of support desired.

Talking frankly about the decision-making process can resolve much of the frustration and lack of follow-through you are experiencing. Discuss the four options. Decide which one appears to be the best considering the risks, timing and stakeholders involved. Then implement it. You may hear a big sigh of relief from the group that finally, dialogue actually turns into action.

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