

Rise above the chaos

Getting everyone on the same page

Question:

I've been assigned to work on a project with six other department managers. At our first meeting, without extensive debate, we reached an agreement about the procedures for how our teams will work together. I was asked to recap the points of our agreement so we can each sign off on the memo. To my astonishment, only one manager concurred with everything in the memo. The other five responded as if we had all attended different meetings. Within a few days, each manager either stopped by my office or called me to lodge their complaint. I wished I had recorded the meeting so I could verify the points we all agreed to. How should I proceed?

Answer:

The first step is to get the department managers together again as soon as possible. To prepare for this meeting, resend the

memorandum to each manager asking them to recap their specific objections. Don't be surprised if you receive fewer responses the second time around. When people are held accountable and can't hide behind the, "That's not what I said," shield, they often become more passive.

This is both good and bad. In the short term, it may save you from being forced into a mediator's role. However, the underlying issue may be that some members of the project team find it difficult to formulate their ideas and present them to the team.

There may be compelling reasons why certain team members hold objections to all or part of the drafted agreement. If legitimate concerns are not addressed appropriately, the project may bottleneck, or worse yet, derail at a critical juncture. I recognize that it may not be your direct responsibility to assess the competencies of your team members. However, it is your responsibility to debrief the appropriate supervisor right away if you think the project may be at risk.

Once you receive all of the responses, prepare a compilation of the objections with the complainant's name or names beside each issue. This will help you appropriately involve each department manager during the meeting.

Begin the meeting on a positive note. Maybe you could thank them for responding quickly to your request and add, "If this is any indication of how we work together, we're going to be very successful." Then say, "We have some issues that have surfaced since our last meeting. The objective of this meeting is to discuss these issues and decide how best to proceed."

Then talk about, and decide, how the team will make decisions: will decisions be made by consensus or majority rule? If the group decides on majority rule, then all opposing members will be acknowledged in the minutes, but will be expected to support the final decision. This will eliminate unne-

cessary conflict between team members and provide the group with a mutually agreed upon resolution process.

Next, begin the process of working through the list of objections. Start with the first issue on the list and invite each complainant in turn to present his or her concerns and recommendations. When he or she is finished, in round robin fashion, ask all the other team members to comment. This will eliminate the risk of someone saying, "I didn't have a chance to comment."

If further discussion is needed, facilitate the dialogue then ask for a vote. When the issue is resolved, move through the remaining items in similar fashion.

It might be helpful to hire or delegate someone to record the minutes of these meetings. This will allow you to participate more freely. Also, if there is not a designated facilitator, discuss whether this responsibility should rotate among each team member so a single person doesn't bear all of the responsibility. These logistics would be good to iron out now before the group becomes too comfortable with your leadership/volunteership.

Lastly, recognize that disagreements are a natural part of the creative process. The I Ching says, "Before the beginning of great brilliance, there must be chaos. Before a brilliant person begins something great, they must look foolish to the crowd." Resistance can feel like chaos, but it is the place where seedlings of new ideas are hatched. Seasoned negotiators call this, "expanding the pie." A simple phrase for a profound process.



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