

The Consensus Lie

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The reason you launched your company or accepted your current position probably has a lot to do with the fact that you understand the technical side of the job. Working with my clients, I am constantly reminded of how much they simply don't know because they are good at what they do and can't look beyond the obvious. This observation also explains why the strongest companies engage consultants to help them achieve success, and recognize the value of an outside perspective and expertise.

The Downfall of Close-Knit Teams

A standard exercise used to find the best solution looks like this... assign various groups within a company the task of finding the best solution for a puzzling conundrum with no resource constraints or technological limits. Then compare the solutions against the actual incident and see which results are affordable, feasible and technologically possible to find the best choice.

The typical response to this exercise is to receive several recommendations from each group which range from brilliant to absurd. Statistics show that only one team in twelve will come up with a simple, fiscally sound, and practical solution to the problem.

So, why can't multiple high functioning teams with no limits on their budgets or creativity come up with the right answer? Simple, really... the basic reason is that top people in high-performing companies often gravitate toward a common mean and that limits their ability to practice innovative collaboration:

1. People tend to think alike and operate within the morays of their corporate culture.
2. Teams seldom tolerate revolutionary approaches and ideas.
3. Team members don't seek outside opinions, and constantly reinforce their own biases when communicating with each other.

In most cases, we find out later that some brave group member *actually suggested the best solution* for the problem, but was ignored and derided, and thus decided not to fight for the ideal solution.

How Outsiders and Innovative Thinkers Help

Outside consultants bring in fresh air – bottom line. Even if a project ends up validating what a client already knows, the evaluation process and stamp of approval is tremendously valuable. But most of the time we help people to view issues differently, consider creative approaches, and question their own preconceptions, which is worth our weight in gold.

It can be tough to be an innovator in corporate America today, but innovators are needed to spark new missions, improve upon established products, and keep companies on the cutting edge. What a shame that they are so often run out of the companies they serve because they refuse to stay within the confines of a mental and cultural box!

Smart clients acknowledge when they need help and they are willing to hire people who don't always agree with them and tow the party line. The most effective teams do not consist of think-alike, act-alike individuals who always get along. The best teams bring together people who have complementary skills and respect for each other, but who can march to the beat of their own drummer and stand up to the crowd.

Consensus is Overrated

The most profitable, long-standing and confident organizations make these kinds of tough decisions. Top-performing companies are smart enough to infuse their culture with fresh air and continually add grist to the mill of their competitive edge. The worst thing that can happen in any organization is to bring together people who fearfully conform to the norms, chronically avoid stepping on toes, and try to be politically correct every second of the day.

So don't be fooled by the illusion of consensus as a positive trend. Overwhelming agreement among personnel and ongoing conformance is usually an indicator of thinking within a box and over-reliance on history and protocol.

Consensus has to follow creativity – not precede it! Agreement can only follow a hearty consideration of all alternatives. As nice as consensus can be on the surface, I'm typically alarmed when I see blind agreement without full exploration of the issues. Any company that can generate a wide range of opinions, analyze and synthesize them to find the best answer, and then move forward with the best option confidently (even without everyone jumping on board) is doing very well!