



WHY YOU NEED TO BE ABLE TO SAY 'NO'

How would you rate your organisation?

1. Think about the typical meetings you attend. Do people speak up if they disagree?
2. If they do, how is this viewed? Is a dissenting voice viewed as useful or irritating?
3. Are employees equipped with the skills and behaviours that ensure they know how to disagree appropriately?
4. Do people also learn how to receive challenge and dissent constructively?
5. Is there positive recognition for those who ask questions, raise issues and challenge? Or do such behaviours lead to reprimand?
6. Are conformity and harmony valued more than dissent and challenge?
7. When disagreements are expressed, can people stay focused respectfully on the issues, or does it become a personal conflict that damages trust and good relations?

Can you have too much of a good thing?

On the face of it, surely collegiality and cohesion are among the top attributes of a great team, whether at board, senior management or project level! You might think so. But they can also be risks. Recently, the Australian Prudential Regulation Authority (APRA) published the results of their investigation into what went so badly wrong at the Commonwealth Bank. It makes sobering reading, whatever your sector. They found that a core problem was what they termed 'over-collegiality'. It seems that good relations, harmony and consensus were prioritised at the expense of dissent. This lack of effective dissent allowed poor decisions (and misconduct) to go unchallenged within a culture of complacency. The results eroded the bonds of trust between customers and the company, "drip by corrosive drip".

The trouble with consensus is that there is often a rush to make a decision before any proper consideration of alternatives. To avoid this common problem, conventional wisdom promotes what's come to be termed the 'diversity dividend'. In other words, we're told that organisations need to ensure a broad array of demographic diversity, with employees of different genders, ethnicities, generations, sexual orientations and so on. The argument is that diversity will deliver better thinking, as a result of more varied perspectives. But research by UGM and others shows that achieving good decision-making is a bit more complex.

The false promise of diversity

First, demographic diversity does not in itself ensure you have diversity of perspectives. If your team includes men and women, as well as people with different backgrounds and experiences, this doesn't necessarily mean they bring diverse perspectives. All it does is increase the *perception* of better quality team decisions but that's not the same as real diversity of input. An example that has been analysed is the cabinet teams of George Bush and Barack Obama. In each case, there were men and women of varied ages and ethnicities – demographic diversity. But all were committed to a single, shared political position. This 'deceptive' diversity occurs in some teams we have filmed where team members, outwardly quite diverse, actually functioned as a tight club. They brought a single, narrow way of thinking (or heuristic) to the issues they faced, often derived from a shared professional training.

A second problem is that, as our filmed data demonstrates, frequently not all team members speak up. Issues are discussed without much in the way of dissent and those who might have contributed that vital alternate perspective said little or nothing. Why is this so common? One reason is that diversity is

known to lower trust and rapport, while increasing the risk of misunderstanding. In contrast, similarity is a powerful predictor of social bonding and high morale. Those seen as different may not speak up because they don't feel that they belong, or because they're not sure how to disagree appropriately in this particular context. Diversity in and of itself is a false promise and is, unfortunately, not linked in any reliable way to high performance. Instead, what is needed is diversity of perspective *plus* the skills and behaviours that support their expression.

Opinion differences need to be expressed effectively

Are different views welcomed? Do people have the skills to speak up and challenge? As well, do people have the complementary skills involved in how to respond constructively when challenged? If there is a culture where challenge is not welcomed, dissent will quite quickly disappear. Instead of a 'speak up' culture, a 'shut up' norm will be reinforced. Often there is support for debate in principle, but not for building the skills and behaviours that will ensure it occurs in practice. It is the persistent expression of diverse views that stimulates better quality thinking. In other words, it isn't difference in itself that supports good decision-making. It is difference plus effective dissenting voices. A dissenting voice, even from a single persistent individual, can influence others, as the famous film 'Twelve Angry Men' shows. Divergent thinking is the lifeblood of good decision-making by opening up the conversation to a greater number of alternatives and a richer examination of the pros and cons of each.

If disagreement is so useful, why isn't it typical?

The trouble is most of us dislike conflict. It makes us feel uncomfortable and we try to avoid it. We bought the mantra that a good team is a harmonious one. Like the CBA managers, we put collegiality ahead of quality and we don't want to risk being viewed as abrasive. But disagreement and conflict are actually quite different. Disagreement is task-focused and appropriately positioned as a business-critical step within every problem-solving conversation.

Remember that the dissenting voice might prove to be the right one! In addition, the evidence is that dissent also provokes better thinking, even when the dissenting voice turns out to be wrong. Being challenged makes you think more cogently and more creatively - thus you reach a better outcome.

Finally, without disagreement skills and a 'speak up' culture, the potential of diversity remains just that: a potential not an actual benefit. But with the right influence skills and positive organisational norms, you'll experience disagreement as invigorating not irritating. This matters because disagreement encourages exploration and deeper enquiry. It not only makes you think, it makes you think better!