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Six Myths and Six Real Deals about Building Consensus, Part 1

by Margaret E. Anderson

ost of us agree that consensus is a worthy goal. Yet we may differ in our concepts of what consensus looks like. As for how we actually achieve this worthy goal, doing what comes naturally can steer us in the wrong direction because many of the best consensus skills are counterintuitive. When we bust the myths surrounding consensus, we get more of what we need from others, while building bridges, not burning them.

Learning the best practices for building consensus is a lot like learning to drive. When you teach your teenager to drive, you don't start him out on a busy freeway, but rather on a small street. Likewise, in learning to build consensus, we start with one-on-one situations, like the ones discussed in this article. In the next issue of Small Talk, we'll go on to bust three more myths concerning consensus in groups.

Myth No. 1: I should begin by presenting my position and backing it up with rational arguments about the downsides of the other person's position.

Positional debate is such a common approach to differences, some people feel it's the only approach. And it can, in fact, be effective when we differ with one person, but wish to persuade, or win the agreement of, a third party. In a formal debate, each participant takes a different position and argues with the other. The goal is not to persuade the other participant, but rather to persuade the audience or official judge. In a legal hearing, the lawyers who argue their positions seek to persuade a judge or jury, not each other. But when we wish to resolve a matter, to persuade the very person who differs from us to come to agreement or consensus, taking and arguing positions can work against us.

Our brains evolved to resist when someone contradicts or challenges our closely held opinions or beliefs, in other words, when someone makes us wrong. When a person begins with positions and arguments, we tend to argue back. Even worse, when one person, let's call her Yolanda, presents her arguments, and the other person, Fran, begins to argue back, Yolanda thinks Fran didn't get her point. So Yolanda tunes out Fran's rationale and turns her mind to a better way of expressing her own arguments.

Let's say Fran is in charge of a church fundraiser. For the past fifteen years, Fran has included an auction, dinner and speaker in the event. Yolanda, a younger member, wants to change the fundraiser to a game party. Here's how their conversation might look if each of them proceeds by positional argument and counterargument:

Y: Hey, Fran, I've been wanting to talk to you about the fundraiser. Some of us younger people would like to try a game party this year instead of the auction and speaker.

F: Games wouldn't raise a fraction of the money we need. The auction and speaker has a firm financial track record.

Y: I said we should try games. Speakers bore us young people. How do you know games won't work if you don't give them a chance?

F: But the middle-aged and older people like the speaker, and they're the ones who donate the best auction items and spend the most money at the event. Yolanda begins with a position.

Fran feels "made wrong," and offended. She instinctively argues against Yolanda's position.

Instead of following Fran's train of thought about money, Yolanda elaborates on, and counterargues for, her original position because she thinks Fran didn't get it.

More counter argument.

Real Deal No. 1: In many situations, it's more effective to avoid taking or arguing positions.

Instead, explain the interests driving your current thinking. Hand-in-hand with that, and often the best starting point, ask questions about the interests driving the one who disagrees with you. And when the other person explains her interests, paraphrase them back to her. That way, she knows you understood her, even though you might not agree. This takes away the temptation for her to tune you out while planning her next argument.

Let's see how the same encounter might look if Fran practices these consensus building and communication skills:

Y: Hey, Fran, I've been wanting to talk to you about the fundraiser. Some of us younger people would like to try a game party this year instead of the auction and speaker.

F: (Pauses) Let me grab a cup of coffee before we discuss this. (Leaves the room)

F: (Returning) What attracts you to the idea of games?

Y: Games, like darts, ping pong and Twister, are active and fun. Speakers are boring.

F: (Sips coffee) So you'd rather be up and moving around, is that right? Yolanda begins with a position.

Realizing that her instinctive reactions to being made wrong and feeling offended by Yolanda's position are counterproductive, Fran takes a break to let her autopilot disengage and her communication skills kick in.

Fran asks about the interests driving Yolanda's position.

Again, Fran feels hurt by the criticism (wrong-making) about her programs. She takes a shorter break by sipping coffee. Then, Fran paraphrases Yolanda's statement, to show Yolanda she listened. This also gives Fran's instinctive reaction additional time to ebb.

| | Y: Not necessarily being up on my feet, but being | Yolanda indicates Fran did not precisely get how she | Y: Hmm. |
|--|---|---|--|
| | involved in some activity. | feels, so she clarifies. This | F: Why don't you think |
| | | is good, since it saves Fran | those over, and let me know |
| | | from trying to work from an incorrect premise. | if anything appeals to you. |
| | | | Y: OK. I will. |
| | F: So you'd rather be doing | Fran tries another para- | |
| | something other than sitting and listening? | phrase. | Nation that huing wining about Valanda's interests |
| | | | Notice that, by inquiring about Yolanda's interests |
| | | | and addressing them, Fran actually got more of what |
| | Y: Right. | Now that Yolanda agrees | she wanted while also leaving Yolanda more satisfied. |
| | | that Fran understands her, | Fran built a bridge, rather than burning one, by con- |
| | | she isn't tempted to tune out. | necting both parties' interests. |
| | F: One of my concerns is | Fran explains one of the | Myth No. 2: I must always compromise to reach |
| | that the leadership has come to count on my net- ting about \$10,000 on the fundraiser. We need it in the budget. | concerns (interests) driving | consensus. |
| | | her preference for an auc- | This, too, is part of our autopilot programming. In |
| | | tion and speaker without directly arguing against | small matters, compromise saves time and makes |
| | | games (without directly making Yolanda's idea wrong). | sense. Suppose Yolanda agrees to help |
| | | | sense. Suppose Totalida agrees to help |
| | | | Fran with the fundraiser. They decide how many |
| | | 0, | other volunteers they will need, and Fran asks Yolan- |
| | Y: Oh. Well, I guess we couldn't make that much- | Yolanda has given in, but Fran would rather have her | da if she will phone a list of people and ask them to |
| | | | join the committee. |
| | money from games. I don't | happily engaged in the | |
| | have to go to the fundraiser. | fundraiser. | Yolanda can't do all the phoning because she has to |
| | | | work late this week. Fran can't do it all either, for |
| | F: That's true. You don't | Instead of trying to argue Yolanda into the fundraiser, | similar reasons. It makes sense for them to compro- |
| | have to, and what I'm won- | Fran asks a question that | mise by dividing the phone list in half. |
| | dering is whether you might like to if we can find a way | addresses Yolanda's inter- | |
| | for you to be more active | ests. | But what happens if they try to compromise on the |
| | and involved? | | programming? More specifically, suppose they decide |
| | | | to reduce the amount of time people spend preview- |
| | Y: Like what? | Because Fran showed an | ing the auction, the amount of time they have to eat |
| | | interest in her, Yolanda has | dinner, and the length of the speech in order to make |
| | | eased off her arguments | time for a short game-playing period. This is what |
| | | and begun to ask questions of her own. | I call "lukewarm compromise." Neither woman is |
| | | | grossly put off by the compromise, nor are they en- |
| | E. Marken late of valuate or | | thused about it. The rest of the congregation probably |
| | F: We have lots of volunteer jobs–childcare, auction | | won't be enthused either. None of the activities in this |
| | check-in, auction floaters, | | disjointed program will last long enough to be most |
| | auction check-out, speaker | | enjoyable or effective. |
| | host. And even though a | | |
| | caterer sends in the food, | | Deal Deal No. 0. Continuity to former and the |
| | we still need help serving | | Real Deal No. 2: Continuing to focus on inter- |
| | and described on | | ests can replace lukewarm compromise with |

and clearing up.

Real Deal No. 2: Continuing to focus on interests can replace lukewarm compromise with creative, mutually satisfying solutions. But if Fran and Yolanda continue thinking about ways to address their interests, they are likely to come up with some truly creative ideas. For example:

- A speaker who can do more than simply lecture, for example, an astronaut who will show video of life in space, or a museum docent who will bring exhibits that people can walk around, look at, and perhaps even touch
- Yolanda and other young people donate game parties in their homes as auction items, lower-cost items that young folks can afford to donate and bid on
- Replace the traditional banquet with one or more cook-off contests; people can walk around and take food buffet style from any entrant's table; each contestant offers a home-cooked batch of their specialty as an auction item

These are only a few of the ideas they might generate when they focus on connecting Fran's interest in netting a good income from the event with Yolanda's interest in more interesting and active programming. Then, by picking, choosing, combining and modifying items from their list, they can create an exciting breakthrough plan.

Myth No. 3: I should tuck these consensus-building principles away in the back of my mind for my next difficult encounter.

This strategy would be like studying a driver's education manual, then waiting until the roads are icy to practice hands-on driving. Because of the counterintuitive nature of many consensus-building skills, waiting for a significant level of personal involvement, serious conflict, complex subject matter and/or the complications of multiple parties adds ice to the road when you have not yet mastered steering and braking.

Real Deal No. 3: The time to act on your new knowledge is now.

But what if you don't have a disagreement to work on right now? That's good. It's best to begin practicing consensus-building skills in relatively safe situations where little is at stake and you are not under pressure. That's why, as mentioned at the beginning of this article, we start with two-way conversations, rather than meetings with larger numbers of people. Likewise, you can begin practicing in low-stakes (or even no-stakes) situations.

Pick one consensus-building skill, such as asking about interests, and set aside a time when you will be with another individual, say, having lunch with a coworker. Resolve to ask at least five questions about the interests behind his opinions, decisions or inclinations. They don't have to be controversial statements. For example, If he says, "I decided to take the family to Washington, D.C., during the kids' spring break," you might ask, "What appeals to you about Washington?"

Continue setting aside safe opportunities to practice this skill until you feel comfortable with it, then schedule a time to add the skill of paraphrasing. Your coworker says, "I feel braindead from analyzing all those spreadsheets," and you paraphrase, "It has a sort of hypnotic effect, right?"

In Part 2 of "Six Myths and Six Real Deals about Building Consensus," we'll sample a few ideas for applying these principles to larger groups.

Margaret E. Anderson trains groups, coaches individuals, and consults on consensus-building and related communication skills. She is the author of Bridges to Consensus—in Congregations. You can find more thorough coverage and many more skills in her book and her weekly blog, both of which can be found on her website, persuasioncoach.com. You may also contact her directly through the website.

For more information about Small Talk and how to strengthen small congregations of all kinds, contact Jane Dwinell at jane@spiritoflifepublishing.com, or visit her website at spiritoflifepublishing.com.

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