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ACHIEVING STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT WITH PRODUCTIVE DIALOGUE

EXPLORE BEST PRACTICES FOR PROMOTING HONEST AND INCLUSIVE
DISCUSSION THAT LEADS TO MORE PRODUCTIVE OUTCOMES.

ACHIEVING STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT WITH PRODUCTIVE DIALOGUE

By Judy Busby, Senior Vice President, Executive Search and Corporate Strategy

The past year has been one of uncertainty and change. Insurers have faced difficult conversations regarding the pandemic's impact on business; logistics for getting employees back in the office; the need for enhanced diversity, equity and inclusion; and more. In some cases, organizations have undergone restructuring, redefined their priorities, and ventured into new territories with increased automation and innovative programs. Along with times of change and increased pressure come more difficult conversations at all levels within the company, especially within the leadership ranks.

As stakes rise and new and perhaps uncomfortable issues are broached, engaging in honest and productive dialogue is crucial. Working as a consultant for numerous leadership teams, I've facilitated many high stakes conversations to help reach strategic alignment when it's needed the most. While organizational structures and personalities vary, there are several approaches that celebrate differing perspectives and lead to more productive outcomes. By leveraging these methods, empathizing with differing points of view and approaching topics with care, leaders can more effectively make decisions and resolve potential issues.





UNDERSTAND THE PERSONALITIES INVOLVED.

It's likely your leadership team is comprised of highly qualified professionals who each bring unique expertise and knowledge to the table. Embrace these diverse perspectives and welcome the holistic strength they provide the company. It may even be valuable for each individual to do a personality, style or communication style assessment, such as Myers-Briggs, DiSC® or LIFO®, to increase their self-awareness.

Consider also facilitating a workshop where individuals can outwardly share

their findings and discuss their preferred communication and learning styles. For instance, certain individuals may prefer just hearing the bottom line, while others need to discuss the full thought process for how a decision was reached. Some may be able to react on information right away, while others need more time to digest and process before reaching a conclusion. By outwardly sharing these insights with one another, individuals can better understand each other and have a common language, setting the stage for more thoughtful interactions, productive problem-solving and enhanced idea generation.

BE STRATEGIC WHEN APPROACHING DIFFICULT TOPICS.

There's an art to bringing up weighty issues in a way that leads to healthy and productive conversations. By approaching these discussions with care, you can better influence how topics are received and the overall outcome of decisions. Tell other stakeholders upfront when you're going to initiate a conversation that might be sensitive or controversial. By providing context, you can help everyone mentally prepare and enter the conversation in the right mindset. This could be as simple as stating, "There's been something on my mind and it's uncomfortable to bring up. I'm going to share the topic, but I'd prefer everyone to not respond right away."

This accomplishes two things: first, it shows you're putting your guard down and actively inviting open conversation around the topic, knowing people may disagree with you. Second, it provides space for individuals to digest the information. By requesting no one responds right away, you are enabling them to move past any initial impulse reactions. The topic can then be revisited, once everyone has had time to think more clearly about the information and prepare for a productive conversation.

LEVERAGE VARIOUS TECHNIQUES TO EFFECTIVELY WORK THROUGH ISSUES.

Conflicting opinions should be welcomed, as partaking in these discussions will ultimately help move the organization forward. Members of your leadership team are working for the best interests of their team and the company,

yet have varying resources, motivators and immediate objectives. Coming to a consensus on key issues may be a challenge. Rather than sitting around a table debating issues, consider creative ways to engage in these discussions. Breaking into smaller groups, ensuring all voices are heard, and better understanding differing perspectives can all help alleviate tension and promote productive discourse. In my experience, there are a few strategies that have worked well among leadership teams and can also translate to the remote environment.

Know when to pause the conversation.

If discussions are beginning to derail, it's often valuable to calmly stop the conversation and focus on better understanding someone's perspective about a topic. What is leading them to feel a certain way about a particular issue? How do those feelings align with your corporate values? Go around the room and calmly share historical knowledge and reasons for taking a particular stance. Define the areas where you do agree first, and then build the conversation out from there.

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Often, people might agree, but are using different words or phrases to convey their points of view. Additionally, different leadership styles and life experiences inform how they approach, solve and overcome challenges. After sharing these insights, individuals can discuss the topic at hand with a better understanding and broader perspective of why someone else might hold the opinions they do.

Challenge perspectives.

If your management team is divided on an issue, a simple way to bring them together is by asking each individual to defend the side they disagree with. By actively seeking out reasons and arguments promoting the other side of a debate, individuals can gain a better understanding of differing viewpoints. This exercise can help uncover new ways of thinking and enable the discussion to continue in a more empathetic way.

Perform a force field analysis.

Invite your team to consider all the factors impacting a decision or goal. Unlike a pro-con list, a force field analysis focuses on a goal and its benefits, as well as the forces and roadblocks that may get in its way. This could be positioned as a free-flowing brainstorm and enable you to more tangibly address concerns as you move toward a solution. Focus on potential barriers and how you can mitigate their impact on your decision. Listing forces for and against a decision side-by-side may also show how one option greatly outweighs the other, helping further guide your conversation.

Take the “six hats” approach.

This method assigns each individual a different color “thinking” hat. The hat represents a distinct role the individual will

play, regardless of their own feelings about a topic. For instance, one hat may focus on just the facts, the other may focus on optimism, while another will share risks and potential problems. Each individual is responsible for embodying this role throughout the conversation and serving as the voice of that side of the issue. You may also consider having each hat represent a population or stakeholder that is affected by the decision, such as customers, employees, shareholders, board members and others. This method can help you see an issue from all sides, while thinking more clearly and objectively. As the discussion unfolds, each participant may also take notes and then present their thoughts, focusing on why specific areas should be further considered and acted upon.

Hear from less dominant voices.

Within most groups, it’s likely there are a few voices that tend to be more passionate and dominant. Encourage reflection and active listening by splitting your team into two groups. One group will discuss the topic (ideally those who are not as forward with their ideas will be in this group), while the other group is only able to observe. Those who are observing the conversation can write down points they hear that are meaningful to further discuss, and then lead a debrief discussion to share those insights.

As you work to resolve difficult issues, focusing on commonalities and approaching topics through a new lens can have a great impact. By welcoming different viewpoints, you can harness individual strengths and relevant experiences, make more informed decisions, and move forward with intention and focus.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:



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