



Hosted by Tom Henschel

Building Consensus – Savvy or Sin?

236 | October 2023

A leader, surrounded by people she knows and trusts, can't seem to get traction with them. In conversation with her coach, she discovers an unexpected cause.

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Polite But Ineffective

Irene was a fascinating blend of 'artist in the clouds' and a crisp leader who got stuff done.

Five years ago, she'd become the head of a fine arts organization. She had a clear vision of where she wanted to take the organization and seemed to have the full support of her board. She had hand-picked her leadership team, filling it with people she trusted, valued and liked.

Now, years later, she was disappointed. Individually they were doing okay, but as a team she found them nice and polite, but not terribly effective. Getting her team unstuck was one of the goals she'd set for her coaching.

I asked what she meant by calling the team "polite."

She shrugged. "They don't speak up. But I need to hear from them. We have some big decisions to make and I want to be sure, when we move forward, everyone's on the same page."

"So polite means being quiet?" I clarified.

"Yes, and it's slowing me down. If I'm not sure everyone's on board, we can't move forward."

“How so?” I asked.

“Consensus is crucial. If we get partway into one of these projects and someone suddenly starts protesting, it turns into chaos. The time to raise objections is now.”

“Can I ask a different question?” I asked.

“Sure,” she said.

Is Consensus a Good Thing?

“You said consensus is important. What did you mean?”

She shrugged again. “It’s not complicated. Consensus is consensus. Everyone agrees on something, then the wheels start to turn.”

“You want decisions to be unanimous,” I said, clarifying.

“Right. Everyone’s on board. I’ve seen what dissention can do. When someone has a pebble in their shoe, it’s going to blister up at some point. I’d rather find out early. What?” she asked, responding to a look on my face.

“Sorry,” I said. “Didn’t mean to interrupt you. A question occurred to me. You’ve talked about two things with your team. One is that they’re polite. The other is that you want them to operate by consensus. I wondered, could those two be connected?”

“How would they connect?” she asked.

I laughed. “That’s what I was wondering!”

We were both silent, thinking.

“Is everyone trying to please mom in order for her to have consensus?”

Then she said, “I can see how they might connect. I want consensus. And no doubt about it, consensus is hard, but that was my choice. And what was the result? People are being polite. Is everyone trying to please mom in order for her to have consensus? I can see how I might have created that monster.”

We were silent again.

Then she said, “But isn’t consensus good?”

I laughed, “Based on your results, I guess not!”

“You got me there!” She smiled. “But what’s the alternative? I don’t want a rebellion later.”

"It's funny, Irene, I don't know you well but my sense is that you are not a black-and-white thinker."

"I'm not," she agreed.

If Not Consensus, Then What?

"Which is why this is surprising. When it comes to your team's decision making, you've created a black-and-white system. Either everyone's on board or no one's on board. All or nothing. Black-and-white. It doesn't seem like you."

She looked away. "What would happen the other way? Some people are left on the dock and the rest of us sail away?"

"That's still black-and-white thinking."

"It is? No! Oh, yeah, it is. Huh. What am I missing? Clearly, I'm not getting it."

"What if no one was left on the dock? What if they were all on the ship, just in different ways?"

"No! That's when factions start. I don't want that."

"To me that's healthy boundaries and clarity of purpose"

"Okay," I said. "I see what you mean. I get it. I really do. I just think differently about what it means for people to be on board in different ways. To me that's not the seeds of rebellion. To me that's healthy boundaries and clarity of purpose."

She looked away, then back at me. "Tell me more. I am beginning to think maybe I'm at the root of all this. Keep going. How is it healthy for people to pretend to be on board when they're really not?"

I smiled. "But they *are* on board. It may not be the way you imagined, but they are on board. Here, wait. Can I give a different 'for instance?' You're married, right?"

"Oh, yes," she smiled. "Thirty-eight years."

"Wow. Mazel tov. So, over those thirty-eight years, has there ever been a time when you two had to decide something and it was apparent that the issue was way more important to one person than the other? So the other person went along. Have you ever had one of those?"

"All the time. Last night picking a restaurant!" she laughed.

"Oh! Perfect! Did you have a nice time?" I asked.

“We did,” she said.

“Even the person who ‘lost?’” I asked, using air quotes.

She laughed. “Yes, even me.”

Gradients of Agreement

I slowed down and shrugged, “I don’t know, but to me, it sounds like you were both on board, *and* that you were not on board in the exact same way. By your definition, that was not consensus. But I think it was, because there are varying levels of agreement. So everything was fine. There were no seeds of rebellion.”

“On a scale of one to ten, how important is this to you?”

She shook her head and smiled. “My husband’s name is Bert. Bert and I have this thing we learned from another couple when we were first married. It makes life really easy. One of us will just ask, ‘On a scale of one to ten, how important is this to you?’ And the other person will say ‘Seven,’ and the other goes, ‘Oh, I’m a four, so go ahead.’ We didn’t do it last night, but we could’ve. We do it all the time. It’s great.”

“What if you’re both at eight?”

She nodded, “Then we need a longer conversation. But that’s okay. Longer conversations are part of marriage. But if he’s a four and I’m a seven, we don’t have to have a longer conversation. It’s been a life saver for us.”

I said, “It’s interesting that you can’t imagine doing a version of that with your team.”

She laughed. “Like they were all Berts!”

“You already know how good a tool it is,” I said.

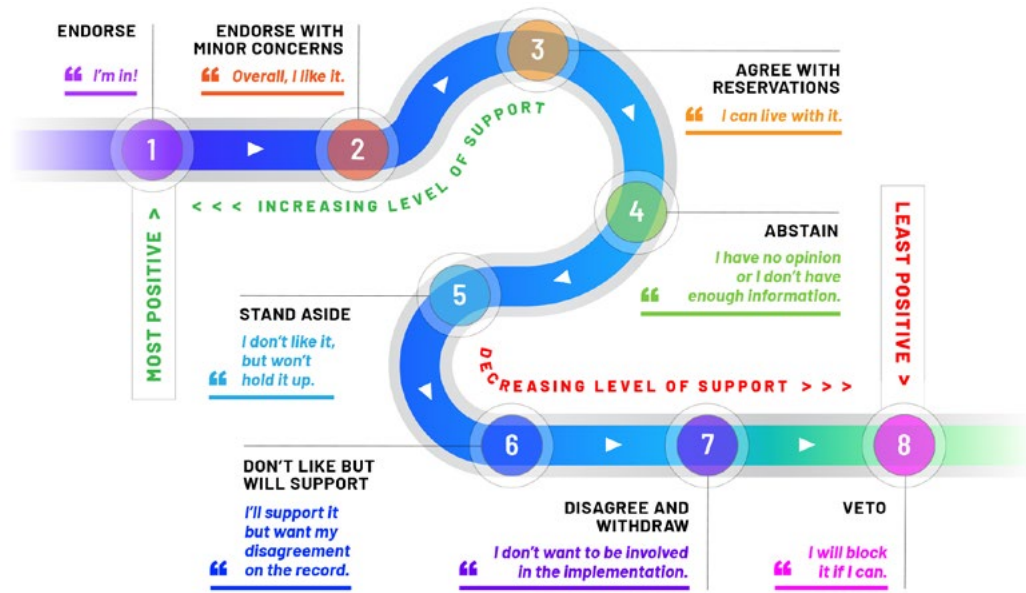
“I do. I never thought of it.”

“If it’ll help, I have a [PDF](#) of exactly this. It’s a line showing gradients of agreement. It’s an eight-point scale. Each number has some words to go along with it. It can be helpful.”

“Words like what?” she asked.

“Like, ‘I can live with it’ on one end of the scale, and, towards the other end, ‘I’ll support it but want my disagreement on the record.’ The different gradients help people express how important something is to them.”

“I’d like to see it.”



"I first saw it from a board I sit on. The chair passed it out before we had to make a big decision. She wanted us to use the language so we could gauge the temperature of the room. It helped us a lot. Even afterwards, we'd say things like, 'I'm a six on this,' or whatever. Kind of like you and Bert."

She was silent, then said, "You said something before that I'd like to get better at."

"What was that?" I asked.

Getting Heard Without Picking a Fight

"You disagreed with me in the smoothest way. You said, 'I think differently about that.' It really jumped out at me because, if it were me, I think I would've said something like, 'Are you crazy?' But that phrase, 'I think differently,' that was slick."

"I can be completely plain spoken without picking a fight. It's empowering"

I smiled. "I'm glad you think so. I can't remember where I learned that, but talk about a life saver. It's been great for me. When I lead with 'I think differently,' I can be completely plain spoken without picking a fight. It's empowering."

"I'm not sure it would be for me. As the boss, when I say I think differently, aren't they going to hear that they ought to change their thinking and agree with me?"

"Is that what you want? Is that why you'd tell them you think differently?"

"No," she said, "the thing that attracts me to 'I think differently' is that it allows for a difference of opinion. Both can exist. But if I say it, as the boss, it's going to carry a different weight."

“I see how it might,” I said. “But, if it’s really a team decision, the boss’s vote doesn’t have to tip the scales. Sometimes the leader picks a number like everyone else. One person, one vote.”

“Whoa. That could put me on the losing side of a decision. Never thought of that! Huh. I guess this begs the question, how empowered do I want the team to really be? Man, you and I have some topics to talk about,” she said.

Irene took the Gradients of Agreement tool to her team. They embraced it right away. It was humbling for her to see that when she stopped driving for consensus the politeness evaporated almost immediately. Once the team had a way to disagree respectfully, they moved quickly towards [The Look & Sound of Leadership](#).



Core Concepts

- Consensus creates caution and congestion
- Use meetings to promote dialogue rather than force agreement
- Give teams tools for expressing divergent points of view
- As a team leader, learn to tolerate disagreement
- As meeting facilitator, invite opinions with neutral open-ended questions

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