

Working Through Differences to Find Mutually Acceptable Solutions

Increasing our capacity to see and work creatively with differences is critical if we are going to build strong, resilient, capable teams/groups. When we are making decisions about topics that include differences of opinion, we need to create structures that encourage people to listen deeply to each other. Don't rush this process; acting from a false consensus, or from a place of "we just have to move forward even with strong disagreements" is detrimental to the process of building respect and trust, which is critical to healthy group dynamics over time. Below are seven approaches you can use to support your group or team in "successfully integrating divergent points of view into creativity and wisdom."¹

Structures That Facilitate Deep, Active, Curious Listening:

1. When it becomes clear in discussion that there are differences of opinion that may not be easily resolved, break people into pairs, asking them to pair up with people they think they might not agree with completely where possible.
 - a. Ask one person in the pair to spend 2 minutes telling the other person:
 - What's most important to them about this topic/decision and what makes it so important and,
 - What they are uncertain about or have questions about.
 - b. The person listening then has 2 minutes to reflect back what they heard, in different words, to be sure they understood well.
 - c. Then the roles inside the pairs swap.
 - d. When you come back to the full group, you can just continue the conversation in an open-ended way, or you can first ask people to report back:
 - What they learned that felt new to them and,
 - Anything that changed in their own perceptions or opinions about the topic/decision.
2. Ask people who are in strong disagreement to reflect back what they are hearing the person they disagree with say before responding, to check for understanding.
3. Ask the group to list the assumptions they are making (put on a wall sheet): look for commonly-held assumptions, conflicting assumptions, and assumptions of either sort that need to be ground-checked.
4. Ask everyone to take a few minutes to reflect on what's hard for them in/about this issue or situation, and what they want. (You can use the non-violent communication "feelings and needs" framework if the group is familiar with that tool, or just ask people to ask themselves "what's hard about this for me?" and "what do I want?") Then invite

¹ Quote from Sam Kaner's *Facilitator's Guild to Participatory Decision-Making*.

people to share whatever they are comfortable sharing about their reflections in pairs or triads, and/or in the full group.

5. If the conflicts between people are emerging as complaints, ask the people complaining to translate their complaints to requests. This can be done by asking them to make a list of what they want, or, if the complaint feels deep-seated or complex, by using the [tool on my website](#).²
6. If the group appears polarized, put simple descriptions of the two positions (i.e. “could cause major financial problems – not worth it” vs. “risk worth taking”) on signs on opposite sides of the room and ask everyone in the group to stand in the spot that represents their position on the question. From there, you can
 - a. Invite reflections on what the line might be showing (i.e. “the folks who are worried that making this change will cause major financial problems seem to feel very strongly about it, whereas those of you who think it’s a risk worth taking seem less attached” or “folks seem pretty spread out in terms of their positions on this” or “there seem to be only a couple of people who are pulled strongly toward not taking the risk, but they are the folks who would be most impacted”).
 - b. Invite people to speak about what is causing them to stand where they are standing (inviting people to move around if their opinion changes)
 - c. Fold the line in two at the center point and do exercise 1 above
 - d. Go on to do another of these exercises – 3, 4 or 7 may be particularly useful.
7. Identify the areas of clear agreement, and the areas where there is still disagreement (be sure you have tested well that you indeed have consensus on the areas where you think there is agreement). Then ask the group to identify:
 - a. Things they are still unsure about;
 - b. Questions they have about the topic or about other people’s opinions or assumptions;
 - c. What specific changes they would need made to whatever is being proposed to feel comfortable with it.

This can be done in the full group, or discussed first in small groups and reported out on wall sheets.

The fundamental goal in all of these exercises is to build a deeper, shared understanding of the diverse perspectives, experiences, concerns, excitements and ideas of the people involved, so that the discussion and decision-making can be rooted in something more useful than an articulation of peoples’ positions.

² There are tools for translating complaints to requests on my website: www.Tasha-Harmon.com, under [Tools for Team-Building and Facilitation](#).