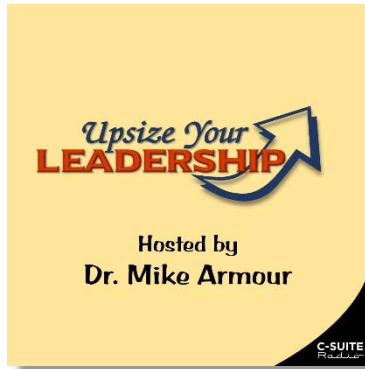# 7 Keys to Creating Consensus
Hosted by Dr. Mike Armour

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Decision-making is at the heart of leadership. On a daily basis, leaders are either making decisions themselves or are seeing that decisions are made by the appropriate parties and within the proper protocols of the organization.

Once decisions are made, leaders must then see that they are fully supported and implemented. Leaders need to unite everyone around the decision and enlist each individual's best efforts toward putting the decision into practice.

This calls for consensus-building. And today, that's the topic which we take up. We examine seven key principles to observe in creating a lasting consensus. Put them to work for you and you are certain to Upsize Your Leadership.

Among other things, leaders are consensus builders. That's part of their mandate to unite people around a course of action. Consensus is not always an easy task. There are countless ways in which a leader's effort at consensus-building can be blocked.

Today I want to talk about some principles which leaders should keep in mind when working to forge a consensus so that they increase their odds of success. Before we do so, however, we should perhaps clarify what we mean by consensus.

Its origin is the word "consent." It's the process of gaining consent to support a decision. And the operative word here is "support." Consensus does not mean that everyone prefers the decision or even agrees with it. It does not even mean that everyone likes the decision. It simply means that everyone consents to support it.

How do they evidence this support? By personally doing everything possible to assure that the decision is implemented successfully. This means that they do not bad-mouth it. They do not work to undermine it. They do not withhold resources necessary for its success. They put their own best effort into it.

Certain management styles make building consensus more essential than is true elsewhere. In the day when top-down, command-and-control management styles prevailed, there was little talk of consensus-building. There was hardly a need for such discussions. In these types of management styles, consensus is baked into the cake, so to speak. Your very participation in

such an organization is your non-verbal acknowledgment that you will fully support unilateral decisions handed down from above.

Management styles like this still exist in abundance, especially in military circles and in paramilitary lines of work such as law enforcement and firefighting. Where life-and-death decisions can arise without warning, survival depends on universal consent to throw oneself behind directives issued by higher authority.

In today's business and institutional world, however, authoritarian management styles are less and less common. The watchwords of contemporary management literature are collaboration and empowerment. Decision-making is more participative. Individual voices play a larger role. To the degree practical, the ideal is for every voice to be heard.

Participative decision-making, we are told, yields broader buy-in for the final decision. And while that is indeed true in many instances, in others it is not. The very nature of open deliberation invites rival positions, ardently defended. The stronger the debate, the more fully advocates for one position or another becomes convinced that their perspective is by far the best one, perhaps the only proper one. When the final decision goes against them, these advocates may be so disappointed or even disgruntled that gaining their consent is a leadership challenge, to say the least.

It is in instances such as this that the true mettle of leadership is tested. How, then, can leaders avoid this dilemma?

As is often the case in leadership, the best way is to avoid this dilemma is to practice prevention. In building consensus, the primary objective of the leader is not to reach a group decision, as important as that may be. Rather, the leader's primary objective is to surround the decision-making process with a spirit and atmosphere which make it easy for dissenters to support the decision once the group has reached it.

That is, leaders should anticipate the possibility that attitudes may develop during the deliberation which make final consensus difficult. They should then structure and guide the decision-making process in such a way that it denies these counter-productive attitudes a place to take root.

To do this, the leader should embrace an agenda which prioritizes these seven elements:
- Agreement in advance to pursue consensus
- Group commitment to the strength of diverse viewpoints
- Openness to ideas and feelings
- Goodwill toward every person in the deliberation
- A fair and equitable process
- Determination to find a solution which is as broadly acceptable as possible
- Behaviors which keep trust in high repair

Let's work through all seven of these in order. First, agreement in advance to pursue consensus. Leaders sometimes encounter the perspective that important decisions should be reached unanimously. I run into this outlook somewhat often in the boards of non-profits and churches, where many on the board may have limited managerial experience. To them,

unanimity may sound like a reliable way to maintain unity, both within the board itself and in the face that the board presents to the organization.

In truth, however, an insistence on unanimous decisions opens the door to a form of dictatorship, what is sometimes called the dictatorship of the minority. One dissenting voice can thwart the decision-making process altogether. And believe me, it happens more often than you might imagine.

To avoid a dictatorship of the minority, there should be a stated agreement by all participants that they will personally consent to and support the decisions of the majority. The only exceptions would be for decisions which, in the judgment of the individual, constitute a clear and incontrovertible violation of law or integrity.

Healthy teams have a standing – and sometimes formal – agreement that consensus will guide their actions. Where such agreements have never been stated, the leader who facilitates the decision should begin by securing a commitment to consensus from everyone participating.

Second, the leader must assure that the decision-makers are all committed to hearing diverse viewpoints. This commitment is grounded in the belief that the best decisions emerge from a setting in which a topic is examined from a host of different perspectives. A decision which merely rubber-stamps the ideas of one or two opinion leaders is not genuinely a collaborative decision, no matter how many people vote for the decision in the final show of hands.

When people oppose a respectful hearing of diverse viewpoints, usually one of two things is true. Either they are not convinced of the strength of their own viewpoint. Or else personal feelings of inadequacy leave them doubting whether they can capably defend their own viewpoint. In neither case should the leader allow them to act in ways which cut off the free and unfettered exchange of ideas. At the same time, the leader may want to work with them individually to shore up their self-confidence in putting forth their perspectives.

Third, and closely related to what we have just said, the discussion surrounding a decision should be open to far-ranging ideas and feelings. The interplay of ideas has the potential to produce great bursts of creativity. Having lots of ideas to choose from is always advantageous when making decisions.

This principle also includes openness to feelings for three reasons. First, feelings point to the intensity with which someone holds to a given idea. They are vital barometers of how important an idea is to the person espousing it or endorsing it.

Second, certain feelings need to be put on the table so that they can be addressed. Consensus is only as strong as the goodwill which undergirds it. When people are nervous about a decision or a point of view, when they have misgivings or anxiety about it, when they have fears related to it, when they feel uncomfortable with it, that needs to be known. So long as these feelings persist, the person will not be able to consent to the final outcome wholeheartedly.

On the other hand, when such feelings are freely laid out, the group can respond in a supportive manner. They can listen to the concerns. They can tweak the decision to take certain concerns into consideration. Or they can help the individual reframe his or her thinking so that the concerns are not so pressing.

Third, certain personality types are highly intuitive. At an unconscious level they sense things about people and situations which are not based in empirical data or direct observations. They simply know intuitively how certain circumstances should be handled. To effect the very best group decisions, these expressions of feelings should have ample opportunity to be expressed.

Returning to our earlier list of seven things which leaders should assure when building consensus, the fourth item on the list is maintaining a spirit of goodwill toward every person in the deliberation. For people to support any decision, they need to feel good about how they were treated in the process of reaching the decision. This means that they must feel that they had sufficient opportunity to share their thoughts, that they were listened to respectfully and attentively, and that their contributions were given due consideration.

They should also sense that they were seen as a valuable participant in the process and that they were given an appropriate opportunity to defend themselves when one of their ideas was questioned or criticized.

The fifth item on the list is a fair and equitable process. This means that there were no hidden agendas. That no one was allowed to railroad through a decision. That the outcome was not predetermined before the decision-making process began.

It is impossible to overstate how important these fourth and fifth considerations are. If people are satisfied that they were treated fairly as an individual participant and that the overall process was fair, they are likely to be willing to accept a final decision which goes against their preferences or recommendations. On the other hand, a decision must be perfect or almost so to garner support from people who feel that they were not treated fairly in the decision-making process or that the process itself was unfair.

Which leads us to the sixth consideration, a determination to find a solution which is as broadly acceptable as possible. Building a consensus should be a win-win-win – a win for the individual participant, a win for others in the process, and a win for the overall team. This goal is best achieved where a conscious-effort is made to take everyone's concerns and concepts into consideration in the final decision. However, this must not be done in such a way that the final decision is merely a patchwork of everyone's ideas, sewn together loosely. Good decisions are never a hodgepodge of concepts. They have a distinct rationale and set a definite direction for moving forward, with a singular, unifying thrust to guide the implementation. Still, where there is room to maintain this clarity while also tweaking the implementation to accommodate contributions from as many participants as possible, doing so is well-advised. People are more prone to consent to a decision if it includes at least some of the thoughts which they offered during the deliberation.

The final item on the list, but by no means the least important, is behavior which keeps trust in good repair. Trust allows us to give one another the benefit of the doubt when we disagree. It allows us to remain united, even when our viewpoints differ sharply. It is the glue which holds collaborative teams together.

One reason for maintaining a fair process is to give people every reason to trust the process. A primary reason for treating all members of the deliberation with goodwill is to enhance the potential for trust to flourish within the team.

In order to trust, people need an atmosphere in which they feel safe, informed, respected, valued, and understood. The promotion of this type of atmosphere is behind the guidelines

which we have outlined earlier for treating individual participants with goodwill and for assuring a process which is fair and equitable.

Leaders must go a step further, however, and discourage any type of behavior which can nick away at trust. Things like snide comments about a participant or one of the participant's ideas. Frequent sidebar conversations when someone is speaking. Rolling of eyes when certain parties make a comment. A tone of disdain or sarcasm when responding to something someone has said.

No one action like this destroys trust. But a steady pattern of them is just as destructive of trust as flaws in character or a breakdown of integrity. As strong as it has the potential to be, trust is fragile. Protect it at all times.

Leaders who attend faithfully to the seven considerations which we have outlined here will find it far easier to gain consensus at the end of a decision-making process. When a decision-making group is somewhat ad hoc – that is, they do not regularly convene to make decisions – the person facilitating the decision would be wise to outline these seven considerations at the outset. And the facilitator should be equally specific about what consensus means, so that everyone knows up front what they are committing to do.

In the case of teams which frequently make joint decisions, this kind of constructive atmosphere should have been so inculcated into the team's culture that the qualities which we have outlined in this podcast are ever-present. As with any set of policies or guidelines, however, people have a tendency to grow lax in observing them with the passage of time. Leaders of such groups should therefore take a few moments periodically to remind the group of the principles which they have agreed to observe to make consensus-building as successful as possible.

Dr. Mike Armour is the managing principal of Strategic Leadership Development International, which he founded in Dallas in 2001. Learn more about his leadership development services at www.LeaderPerfect.com.

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