Pitfalls of Making Decisions Collaboratively

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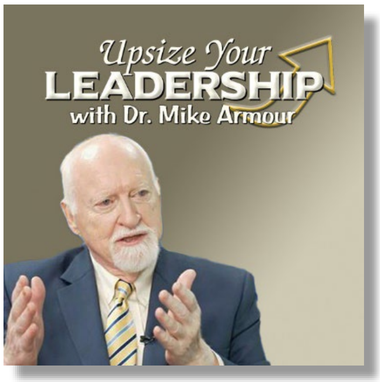

We cannot imagine an effective organization without managers. Someone must be ultimately accountable for seeing that the organization as a whole and the critical functions within it achieve what they are intended to accomplish.

But how should we structure the relationship between managers and those they manage? The answer is, "It all depends." In organizational structure as in architecture, form should follow function.

There are four possible structures. One that is particularly attractive today is the collaborative structure. Its appeal has risen steadily for a century or more. That's largely because it has very attractive advantages.

But a collaborative structure also has some distinct pitfalls. Avoiding these pitfalls demands special skill on the part of a manager. And that's the focus of today's podcast. If you work in a collaborative environment, the takeaways from the next 15 minutes will upsize your leadership.

For thousands of years, the most common organizational structure has been a hierarchical one. It's the way all kingdoms and empires were organized, all military organizations, even powerful religious institutions such as the Catholic and Orthodox churches. It's little surprise, therefore, that when the first huge corporations appeared in the 19th century, they chose a hierarchical structure, as well.

Industrialization, however, gave rise to alternate structures. As manufacturing processes became technologically sophisticated, as transcontinental railroads allowed the development of national markets, and as corporate finance became increasingly complex, a new workforce emerged. It was unprecedented in its makeup.

For millennia, a worker's valued depended on brawn and manual skill. Now, for the first time in history, brainpower, not brawn was in demand. Creating an educated labor force became a national priority. Initially the goal was to produce workers who were highly literate. Very soon, however, businesses and manufacturers needed employees who brought rigorous academic training to the workplace.

In this environment, companies began experimenting with management structures that could capitalize more fully on the ideas and planning insight which these knowledge-workers brought to their workforce. In lieu of command and control management, experiments with collaborative decision-making came to the fore. And the move toward collaboration accelerated through the entire 20th century and continues to do so today.

It was soon apparent that a collaborative management structure brought distinct benefits which were not typical by-products of historic hierarchical management. Not the least of these was enhanced creativity and innovation. When individuals with diverse perspectives, skills, and backgrounds came together, they brought a wealth of ideas to the table. The result was a synergy which led to groundbreaking solutions that would have been unlikely if the decision-maker had relied primarily on his or her own skills and resources.

Not only that, diverse perspectives meant that the assumptions which went into decisions were vetted more thoroughly. Collective decision-making minimized the degree to which personal biases and preconceptions colored the chosen course of action.

No less important, the worker's opportunity to have a voice in key decisions encouraged trust, increased motivation, and improved morale. This led to higher job satisfaction and, in turn, greater retention. Not only that, it resulted in a broader sense of ownership in the final decision.

Little wonder, therefore, that collaborative management structures became commonplace in Western economies. No one writes books any longer on the advantages of hierarchical managerial structure, even though it's the more appropriate management system for organizations such as military, police, and fire-fighting units. By contrast, recent decades have produced hundreds of books on collaboration, with more appearing continually.

In place of a top-down structure, which gives us the all-too-familiar organization chart, collaborative management structures take a distinctively different form. In management training classes, I typically illustrate it as a circle of peers who have open lines of communication running from each person to every other member of the circle. Instead of having a place at the head of the organization, as in historic management structures, the manager in a collaborative structure is positioned in the middle of this circle of peers, again with lines of communication running to each of them.

Even though the manager is not portrayed as part of the circle of peers, for purposes of working toward decisions, the manager is indeed a peer. But he or she participates in this process, not as a boss, but as a facilitator. It's the manager's job to facilitate the necessary dialogue to advance collaborative decision-making by the group as a whole.

The goal of collaboration is to reach consensus on what should be done and how it should be done. In reality, consensus is not always possible. There may be conflicting viewpoints in the group which cannot be reconciled, and advocates for these viewpoints hold to them staunchly. When such stalemates occur, the manager retains the right to make the requisite decision unilaterally. But in a fully collaborative structure, the exercise of this prerogative is a method of last resort.

Given the benefits which it affords, we can readily recognize why a collaborative management style has enthusiastic support. This enthusiasm is so great, indeed, that its proponents and advocates sometimes make it sound like a panacea for solving complex problems, fostering innovation, and enhancing productivity.

Nevertheless, collaboration is not without pitfalls. In addition to facilitating the decision-making process, the manager in a collaborative structure has the duty to steer the group away from these dangers. One of the most serious mistakes is the failure to articulate clear goals and objectives for the collaboration.

Without a shared understanding of what the collaboration is to achieve, members of the group are left to reach their own individual conclusions on the matter. And to the degree that their conclusions diverge, the effort at collaboration can easily result in needless confusion, as people are operating from incongruent perspectives regarding their task. This not only invites misunderstanding, it also paves the way for irrelevant issues to be tossed into the conversation and for the entire process to suffer from inefficiency and wasted time.

The first task of the manager-facilitator is thus to lead the group to agreement on the goals and objectives for every collaborative initiative which they undertake – especially the significant ones. It's not the group's responsibility to define these parameters. The manager must shoulder that duty.

A second pitfall is uneven participation. Several different factors can yield this unevenness. One is personality differences. Some people do their best thinking in settings which are highly interactive. Others think best when they have an opportunity for unhurried reflection.

In group meetings, those who thrive on interaction are prone to dominate. They are quick to put their ideas on the table. They argue their case energetically. And they push for their recommendations to be adopted sooner rather than later.

Meanwhile, those who are more reflective and introverted feel too distracted by this interactive give and take to do their best thinking. They therefore tend to be less vocal. Or they may remain silent altogether.

Unless a decision is truly urgent, therefore, wise managers will make an effort to draw out those who are quiet. Whenever possible, I've found it beneficial to allow a day or so to elapse between a group discussion of a decision and finalizing the decision. In the interim between the two, I circle back to everyone – but my reflective folks, in particular – to see if they have any additional input to be considered before we decide. During this interim, it's not unusual for these "quiet" types to make some major contributions or crucial observations.

If the manager does not handle these personality differences adroitly, the stage is set for resentment of those who dominate the conversation. Because they speak up so promptly, so frequently, and so energetically, their point of view often tends to prevail in most final decisions. They seem to get their way repeatedly. When they come to be resented, camaraderie and esprit break down within the group.

A third pitfall is for the group to become stymied. This develops when they cannot reach consensus, and deadlock or paralysis sets in. Sometimes, to avoid prolonged deadlock, the group resolves an impasse by agreeing to a solution which is less than optimal. In effect, they settle for a compromise solution on which they can build consensus, even though no one is fully pleased with it.

Neither deadlock nor suboptimal decisions is a desirable outcome. Sustained indecision yields frustration and diminished engagement in the collaborative process. Suboptimal decisions never receive a full-body embrace by those who opted for them. Consequently, such decisions fail to gain broad ownership within the group and tend to fare somewhat poorly once they are implemented.

This is why I said earlier that the manager must reserve the privilege of breaking an impasse within the group by making a decision personally in those instances when group consensus is not forthcoming. Since suboptimal decisions are an admission that consensus is beyond reach, managers should not hesitate to impose their own decision in these circumstances, either.

On the other hand, if a suboptimal decision is adequately workable, the manager may want to forego his or her override prerogative. If managers impose their own solutions too often, they can inadvertently undermine enthusiasm for the collaborative process. If group solutions are repeatedly set aside by the manager, the group may conclude that the manager does not genuinely want their input. They will view the manager's commitment to collaboration as questionable, at best.

When this happens, the manager loses trust, and the team's buy-in to the collaborative process goes into retreat. Therefore, managers should never pursue a collaborative structure unless they trust their people enough to routinely accept decisions which result from collaborative deliberation.

A fourth pitfall is inadequate accountability within the group. In earlier podcast episodes this year, I've dealt extensively with the issue of accountability. So, I won't plow that soil again. It's very common for managers – newer ones especially – to feel uncomfortable with holding people accountable. If enforcing accountability is a challenge for managers, it's doubly so for a group. Still, it must be done.

Collaboration counts on every team member to carry his or her own load, not just in making decisions, but in completing tasks which are part of the decision-making process and in shouldering their individual role and responsibility in implementing decisions which are made. When team members drop the ball in this regard, the consequence can impair the effectiveness of the entire team effort.

Thus, every collaborative management circle must establish defined mechanisms for holding one another accountable. The group itself needs to engineer this mechanism. It should not be imposed by the manager. And designing their process of mutual accountability should be one of the first tasks the group undertakes.

A fifth pitfall is what I would describe as excessive collaboration. Not every decision within a team needs to be reached by group consensus. Managers need to have a clear sense of what types of decisions are to be made through collaboration and which ones are not. These distinctions should be spelled out early and restated periodically.

Otherwise, it's easy for some in the group to take the position that every decision affecting them or their work should be made collaboratively. If this attitude becomes widespread, the team may become resentful when the manager makes key decisions independently.

Making every decision a collaborative one is not only an unworkable approach sheerly due to the time demands, it puts a manager in an untenable situation. As managers, we are often aware of confidential information which cannot be shared with everyone in our decision-making circle. Of necessity, then, some decisions must be reserved for ourselves. Managers must therefore identify explicitly the types of decisions which will be made collaboratively and the types that he or she will make unilaterally.

So, there you have it – five pitfalls that can undo the notable benefits of collaborative decision-making. And I use that word "notable" intentionally. Nothing which I've said today should be taken as an effort to undermine collaboration. I believe in it ardently and argue for it frequently.

But you must remember that my earliest experiences of leadership were in the non-profit world, where building consensus among donors, workers, and volunteers is a daily essential. That can only be accomplished in a collaborative atmosphere.

From the outset of my leadership responsibilities, I've had to contend with threats to the collaborative spirit. And I've learned that the five pitfalls which we've examined today must never be underestimated or overlooked. They demand our vigilance as leaders.

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