

Creative conflict-based problem solving for leaders

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Many problems that a group may face are complex and ambiguous and there are several alternative solutions that might be adopted. That choice can be a leadership challenge in itself.

These types of ***strategic problems*** require a more thorough examination of the assumptions and inferences that underlie them and their solutions.

In this kind of situation, team leaders, managers and strategic planners can use one of two important conflict-based problem-solving techniques: dialectical inquiry and devil's advocacy.

Such conflict-based, problem-solving models stress '*critical evaluation*' over group harmony. This kind of a destructive foundation for future success provides an interesting paradox.

While group morale and interpersonal relations are always at some risk whenever individuals engage in conflict, many problem-solving teams find that structured conflict can yield high-quality results.

Let's briefly describe two problem-solving models based on conflict.

Dialectical Inquiry

In the dialectical inquiry approach, the team uses the '*same set of data*' to create or formulate two separate and opposing recommendations and then formally debates these recommendations based on the assumptions that were used to derive them. The philosophy behind this method is that a clearer understanding of the situation and an effective solution result when the assumptions underlying each recommendation are subjected to intense scrutiny and evaluation.

Here is a simple or basic outline of procedures for preparing and carrying out a dialectical debate:

Divide your whole group into two advocate subgroups.

Have one subgroup develop a set of recommendations for solving the problem, making sure to keep a list of all key assumptions and facts that underlie them.

Give a copy of this list and the recommendations to the other subgroup.

After receiving the first group's list of key assumptions, the second group should then set out to develop '*another set*' of plausible counter-recommendations whose assumptions contradict those of the first group.

Once each group has catalogued their key assumptions about the situation and developed their plans for solving the problem, '*structured*' debate between the two subgroups is ready to begin.

Have someone state the problem the group is trying to solve.

Select an advocate from each of the subgroups to present orally and in writing all key facts, data, and assumptions to the other group. You may have one do the oral, and a second handle the writing.

After each side, has had a chance to make their presentation, the subgroups should then debate both plans, the goal being to expose hidden and/or faulty assumptions in either one.

Once the debate is completed, the *'whole'* group should agree on which assumptions are most plausible and develop and/or fine-tune the recommendations based on these *'surviving'* assumptions.

Devil's Advocacy

Much like dialectical inquiry, the process of using a devil's advocacy for problem solving and decision-making relies on *'structured'* conflict to ensure a high-quality decision is reached. In this approach, a solid, well-supported argument is laid out for a set of recommendations and then subjected to a grilling evaluation by another person or subgroup.

Those who use devil's advocacy assume that only the best plans will survive such extensive censure.

The following procedures will help you and your team prepare for a round of devil's advocacy:

Divide your team into two subgroups, one of which will serve as devil's advocate.

The subgroup that is not devil's advocate should develop a plan to solve the problem, making sure to write down all key assumptions and facts that support them.

The first subgroup then submits the recommendations and a list of the assumptions that underlie them to the devil's advocacy group.

The devil's advocate group subjects the plan to an intense evaluation, trying to uncover everything that is wrong with their recommendations and inaccurate with the assumptions.

The first subgroup would then go back to their initial plan or recommendation and adjust, edit, or adapt their recommendations based on the *'valid'* criticisms of the devil's advocate group.

"Peace is not absence of conflict, it is the ability to handle conflict by peaceful means."
Ronald Reagan

Creative conflict can be constructive.

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