
Why Bother with Consensus Building?

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[...]

Consensus building is not about badgering parties into compromise. Instead, it is about creating a collaborative workspace where new ideas can lead to better agreements. Elsewhere in this issue of CBI Reports, and at our website you will find examples of the kind of work we're doing around the world. We hope you'll spread the word: consensus building can help leaders and organizations to create better solutions to complex, pressing problems.

If you listen to any cable or radio news show for an hour, chances are that someone will ask whether there is consensus in Washington, Wall Street, or Main Street. As defined by Merriam-Webster dictionary, *consensus* means 1) unanimous or general agreement; 2) group solidarity of sentiment or thought. These days such solidarity can be hard to come by.

When I ask audiences what *consensus building* means, the most common response is that it involves discussion or debate that leads to some minimal agreement or watered-down compromise. But that's a far cry from the creative and collaborative efforts and outcomes that I see in our work. Practiced well, consensus building involves:

1. Bringing additional players into the process who can add new or different information and perspectives;
2. Creating ground rules for conversation that make it possible for parties to understand one another's interests;
3. Identifying areas in which technical data are conflicting, ambiguous, or subject to different interpretation;
4. Supporting "joint fact finding" to help move the deliberations beyond positional claims and counterclaims and to establish shared assumptions or baselines around past findings and current or future risk and uncertainty;
5. Fostering the invention of new ideas and options that meet the parties' interests more substantially than the options that had previously existed.

It's this last aspect that most people miss. Often, the new ideas and options that emerge through consensus building are the ones to increase the legitimacy of solutions, making widespread endorsement and implementation more likely.

When I describe what CBI practitioners are up to—conflict assessments and negotiation audits; consensus building; tailored training and coaching; neutral assistance in complex negotiations—audiences are surprised at the range of problems we tackle using a common theory, the Mutual Gains Approach. But as Kurt Lewin once remarked, there is nothing so practical as a good theory. When parties collaborate to invent options that address their goals and concerns, they create agreements that are more efficient, more valuable, and more sustainable than what they could have created in isolation or in positional haggling. It doesn't matter whether they are negotiating a billion dollar commercial venture, an international trade agreement, an environmental policy initiative, or

the design of a local public school.

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The most common objection (and misconception) that I hear is that consensus building “takes too long.” This was the opinion of a CEO with whom I spoke recently. In his mind, consensus required ceding control to a large group that would bat around a few options until everyone assented to one of them, perhaps in a modified form. Summoning a bit of courage, I asked, “How long will it take if you try to implement a bad idea?” He looked irritated but then laughed, saying, “I get the point.” I suggested that an outside facilitator could draw out hidden interests and concerns, focus discussions, identify missing information, help generate new ideas, pinpoint sources of disagreement, and give both creativity and ownership to the group—without a lot of extra time.

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