
When the issues are intractable and your team divided

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There comes a moment in every scholar's life when you realise that much of what you have spent your time researching is actually not that useful in the grand scheme of things, and that a change of direction is needed.



I had studied conflict in small teams for many years when I found myself leading a small team that was hopelessly divided and I was clueless how to proceed. Almost everyone knows that you will ideally want your team to all agree the best way forward (i.e., consensus) and with a little prodding from the leader, teams can often reach a state where everyone largely agrees how to move forward. But what happens when the group is bitterly divided and the sub-groups feel quite strongly about which direction is best. Now what?

There are many important issues over which reasonable people can disagree, especially when it comes to important strategic decisions. You'll remember the debates after 9/11 broadly about whether the US should close the doors and withdraw behind the fortress walls, or engage with the world to try to change the hearts and minds of those who oppose the US. The conversation in small policy groups all over Washington must have been struggling with this. Or imagine the individual boardrooms of the banks that were bailed out where the discussions about bonuses must have been very interesting – between those who believe that sizeable bonuses are required to retain the best talent, and those who would not want to raise the ire of government regulators. These are not every day decisions, but rather they are decisions that invoke more than one strongly held value, so that reasonable individuals can come down on one side or the other, and both sides will feel passionate and 'right.'

I have been looking at situations like this, and at small group decision making processes over the last several years and have made some rather surprising discoveries – or at least findings that were not what I and most executives I asked had initially expected. That is, when leading a small group of people who are strongly divided, 'majority rule' (i.e., voting) leads to extremely poor outcomes! Somehow this strikes many people as odd, when voting is at the heart of democratic values. So, I spent a lot of time searching for the answer as to why this might be the case. I finally stumbled on the answer in reading, of all sources, the 'Federalist Papers.' What I realise now is that

yes, the framers of the US Constitution were highly concerned with majority rule, but they were also equally concerned with minority rights. If you want to keep minority factions engaged with politics (i.e., rather than plotting revolution), then their point of view need to be thoroughly heard in public, and their rights respected. The problem with majority rule in small groups, at least as typically practiced, is that it is used to short-circuit discussions and 'shut-down' minority points of view. In other words, voting in small groups as generally practiced does not respect the rights of the minority, so the losers of the vote are likely to actively undermine majority decisions.

So, what is it that does work? Having looked now at hundreds of small groups, I find that consensus is best (i.e., that the group not become divided), but that when a strong divide does emerge within the group, the group should seek to come to qualified consensus, which is that everyone in the group can live with the decision even if it is not everyone's first choice. Second best is legitimate leader decide. When a leader is perceived as legitimate – either because they are individually trusted, or because they have been duly elected, etc., then that leader takes the responsibility for the decision and if things turn out well they will be vindicated, and if things turn out poorly, the anger is directed at the individual leader, preserving the group, organisation, or system from the anger. Or in other words, belief in the system survives. This is the point of representative democracy, where anger can be directed at individual decision makers and representatives, and yet belief in the overall system persists. At the bottom of the list of preferred decision making procedures is voting, not only in terms of member satisfaction with the group, but also in terms of quality of decision making and long-term viability of the group.