

Introduction to Building Team Consensus

To set the stage for the new edition of this book, I would like to summarize some of the insights that have emerged in the last decade in three crucial areas. The first is the area of brain research. This research has illuminated our understanding about how the brain works best and how to capitalize on its workings. Needless to say, this research has implications for education. It also has immense implications for leadership. Consequently, the second area focuses on recent thinking about effective leadership. Finally, given the rising demand for consensus processes, the third area is consensus itself.

THE BRAIN RESEARCH

Brain researchers identify three distinct sections of the brain: the brain stem, the middle brain, and the neocortex. Sometimes the brain stem has been labeled the reptilian brain because it resembles the brain that developed in reptiles. The middle brain has been called the old mammalian brain since it represents the additional brain developed in the initial mammals. The neocortex represents the brain that developed in humans and other primates.

In addition, brain research identifies three functions of the brain. The first comprises the automatic functions of survival,

sex, respiration, and digestion. All these occur without conscious thought. These automatic functions are centered in the brain stem.

The second function deals with emotions, memory, and social connections. Sometimes this area is identified as the limbic system. It is important to note that these functions may occur in the middle brain but that memory occurs in the neocortex also.

The third function of the brain is higher order thinking. Linguistic skills, analytical skills, and creative skills are all part of this third function, a lot of which is located in the neocortex.

A crucial concept in brain research is downshifting. While higher order thinking is encouraged through high-challenge tasks and situations, high-threat tasks and situations often take a person out of higher order thinking and into the emotional functions of the middle brain or even into the fight-or-flight, survival functions associated with the brain stem. Tasks and situations must be highly challenging but not highly threatening in order to keep people in their highest thinking level, associated with the neocortex.

Brain researchers Renate and Geoffrey Caine have summarized their work in the form of twelve brain principles, quoted here.

- Principle 1: The brain is a complex adaptive system.
- Principle 2: The brain is a social brain.
- Principle 3: The search for meaning is innate.
- Principle 4: The search for meaning occurs through "patterning."
- Principle 5: Emotions are critical to patterning.
- Principle 6: Every brain simultaneously perceives and creates parts and wholes.
- Principle 7: Learning involves both focused attention and peripheral perception.
- Principle 8: Learning always involves conscious and unconscious processes.

Principle 9: We have at least two ways of organizing memory.

Principle 10: Learning is developmental.

Principle 11: Complex learning is enhanced by challenge and inhibited by threat.

Principle 12: Every brain is uniquely organized. (Caine & Caine, 1997, p. 19)

Because the brain is a social brain, it is uniquely adapted to working with others. The brain can function well in association with others, provided the group uses tools and strategies that foster helpful social connections. This finding suggests that fundamentally the brain wants to connect with others. Only negative past experiences change this orientation. On the other hand, positive experiences can restore faith in connecting with others. Since the brain is geared for social interactions, leaders will do well to use well-thought-through strategies that promote interactions that facilitate consensus. "Social experience actualizes human intelligence" (Dickman & Stanford-Blair, 2002, p. 58).

The brain is constantly attempting to make sense of the data it receives. Fashioning meaning is one of its strongest functions. One way it does this is by making connections, sometimes with previously learned material, and at other times among things presently being studied. This function suggests that the more the brain is asked to make connections, the more it thrives and grows. The more the brain is called on to discern patterns, the more alive and active it becomes. This understanding makes it incumbent on leaders to provide enough information so that a team can draw helpful conclusions. This approach is far more effective than leaders' presenting their own conclusions and imperatives to a group.

Emotions play a crucial role in the functioning of the brain. A supportive and encouraging environment enhances the higher order thinking capacities of the brain. Once again, a challenging environment exercises the brain. A depressing

or threatening environment only makes the brain want to get away. This fact calls on leaders to create environments that support and encourage participation and risk-taking. “Emotion is the arbiter between lower and higher brain structures” (Dickman & Stanford-Blair, 2002, p. 74).

Our new understanding suggests not only that the brain thrives on complex tasks but that it can work on many different steps of a task at once. In other words, we cheat people when we make things too easy.

A related section of brain research has focused on intelligence. Howard Gardner’s extensive research has led him to propose a theory of multiple intelligences. In 1983 his book *Frames of Mind* identified seven different intelligences. In the 1990s he added an eighth. Until his theory emerged, intelligence was generally viewed as uniform, and one had either a lot of it, some, or practically none at all. Gardner proposes that everyone has a unique mixture of all eight intelligences, some of them stronger than others.

Gardner goes on to suggest that intelligences can be modified and that we can become more comfortable in our areas of weaker intelligence. People who have a chance to use and exercise their strong intelligences become more open to experimenting in their weaker ones. Imagine the implications for leadership. The adept leader finds ways to tap into many intelligences, thus bringing more and more people on board. The knowledgeable leader analyzes the strengths of colleagues and matches colleagues with tasks and assignments that capitalize on their unique sets of intelligences.

“Leadership connections to the brain have been long assumed, given the brain’s mediating role in all interactions between people. Emerging knowledge about intelligence, however, presents an opportunity to tighten the brain-leadership connection—an opportunity for leaders to better understand and engage the intelligence of self and others” (Dickman & Stanford-Blair, 2002, p. 9).

If intelligence is now understood to be “multidimensional and malleable” (Dickman & Stanford-Blair, 2002, p. 19), then leadership styles and consensus approaches are called on to

be multidimensional and malleable also. Leadership needs to become more alert in reading the people surrounding the leader and to amass a host of strategies to use when working with colleagues.

ABOUT LEADERSHIP

Today leadership needs to respond to a dramatic paradigm shift. The leader no longer lives in a vertical, top-down environment. There is a shift toward high degrees of participation from all levels.

Participation, though, is not an isolated phenomenon. It is part of a wider circle of factors that define how human beings relate to one another in our times. It is a key component of the new paradigm of living in the 21st century, and as such, finds allies in other kindred disciplines such as conflict mediation, dispute partnering, and facilitative leadership, to name a few. (Troxel, 1993, p. 6)

Gone are the days when a leader could simply mandate a new direction, a new strategy, or a new product. The ideal leader taps the wisdom of every level of an organization, particularly to get the insights of those who are on the “front lines.” The wise leader knows that these are the people who will carry out any new directive and who often have very practical experience to guide what will work and what will not work.

Today’s leader combines many roles and wears many hats. McEwan identifies ten of these. While this list was created in the context of school principals, it can clarify the role of any leader.

1. The Communicator
2. The Educator
3. The Envisioner
4. The Facilitator

5. The Change Master
6. The Culture Builder
7. The Activator
8. The Producer
9. The Character Builder
10. The Contributor (McEwan, 2003, p. xv)

The facilitator role has become an extremely important role within the culture of participation. It is a role that guides and elicits rather than declares and demands. It is a role that is generous with information and trusting of people's capacity to make sound decisions and recommendations when the facts are known. It is a role that conveys genuine respect and appreciation for the talents and skills of colleagues. It requires enhanced interpersonal skills and genuine tact. All these requirements suggest that the facilitator role is not an easy one to play.

It is important at this point to note that a facilitative role in no way abdicates strong leadership. Rather it transforms strong leadership into a form that engenders employee buy-in and finally employee loyalty as people discover that their insights and skills are genuinely honored, appreciated, and used. The facilitative leader can experience more powerful influence than ever, and in an entirely different way. "The facilitative leader helps groups and individuals become more effective through building their capacity to reflect on and improve the way they work" (Schwarz, 2002, p. 327). Furthermore, a person can play the role of a facilitative leader even if that person is not the stated formal leader (Schwarz, 2002, p. 327). In other words, sometimes just by asking the right question at the right time, a leader can move a meeting out of a discussion getting nowhere and into a discussion leading to a decision or a solution.

As noted above, there has been a paradigm shift toward participation. One implication of this shift is that management philosophy is shifting from a top-down, one-way approach to a philosophy that encourages learning, two-way dialogue,

empowerment, and loyalty (Schwarz, 2002, p. 328). Either formally or informally, management is listening to front-line workers to glean their concerns as well as their suggestions, which suggests that managers are sharing more data so that their colleagues can offer realistic proposals. Because the front-line people are empowered to make helpful decisions on behalf of the client, the potential for increasing client satisfaction grows. When people's creativity is tapped, their commitment and loyalty grow.

Supportive of this aspect of management and leadership is a principle called "distributive leadership" (Fullan, 2003, p. 24; Hargreaves & Fink, 2004, p. 10). Part of the leader's task of empowerment is to initiate colleagues into dimensions of leadership, in other words, to become a leadership trainer, imparting to others the skills and capacities the leader has developed over time and through experience. Far from diminishing the leader's role, this sharing strengthens it and, needless to say, transforms the company, organization, or institution. What may be difficult for the leader to comprehend at first is that leadership roles have become extremely complex and demanding today. The more insight, wisdom, and support the leadership dynamic gets, the more successful it will be.

Because leadership roles have become so demanding and overwhelming, leadership sustainability has become an important area of concern. "Individual sustainability concerns the ability to keep on going without burning out. The key to doing this is not an all-out marathon, but rather cyclical energizing. To do this, leaders need to seek sources and situations that push the limits of their energy and engagement, coupled with rituals or periodic breaks that are energy recovering" (Fullan, 2005, p. 35).

Fullan goes on to identify eight arenas of sustainability:

1. Public service with a moral purpose
2. Commitment to changing context at all levels
3. Lateral capacity building through networks
4. Intelligent accountability and vertical relationships (encompassing both capacity building and accountability)

5. Deep learning
6. Dual commitment to short-term and long-term results
7. Cyclical energizing
8. The long lever of leadership (Fullan, 2005, p. 14)

Note that the first element of sustainability is moral purpose. It is leaders' belief in the moral purpose of their leadership that allows them continually to renew their energy and return day in and day out to the challenges and struggles (Fullan, 2003, p. 19). Believing in their moral purpose requires continual reflection and remembering the deep reasons that at one time pushed them to enter their field of work.

Another element related to sustainability is what Fullan calls "cyclical energizing," which calls for leaders to step back, take a vacation, do something different, and so on. It requires some humility to believe that life at work will continue even with their absence. It requires trust that the work will be there awaiting their return. Those who do not find some way to reenergize themselves will lose the spark, the spirit that also helps renew colleagues. This renewed energy allows a leader to keep stretching out to the new to discern what pieces of the new will improve the organization, the company, or the institution.

Many organizations, when experiencing struggle and difficulty, bring in very high-powered, well-known, and charismatic leadership to help repair the situation. Doing this does indeed restore some energy and hope. Yet very often that energy is centered in the charismatic leader. If the leader does not enable a shared vision among many, then when the leader moves on, motivation and energy collapse. That is why charismatic leaders do not, in the end, foster sustainability in leadership (Fullan, 2005, p. 30; Hargreaves & Fink, 2004, p. 10).

Another reason is that the charismatic leader does not really understand the complex workings of the organization and therefore does not really help transform the organization's structures to help it improve.

We also have fresh insight into the crucial role of the manager. This role is different from the role of the head of an organization. The manager is closest to the front-line worker. "We

had discovered that the manager—not pay, benefits, perks, or a charismatic corporate leader—was the critical player in building a strong workplace” (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999, p. 32). It is the manager who has the potential of releasing the creativity and commitment of these workers. This potential has to do with how well the manager really studies the workers and matches the tasks to the workers’ strengths and abilities. In addition, if the manager is difficult to work with, rarely appreciating others’ work, then workers’ desire to keep working in that job fades. This potential also includes the capacity on the part of managers to trust in their workers. “They believe that if you expect the best from people, then more often than not the best is what you get” (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999, p. 117). This trust is crucial if the manager decides to rely on the wisdom of the workers. If the manager doesn’t really trust the workers, the workers will not want to communicate their best wisdom to the manager. Or, “if you don’t trust others, they won’t trust you” (Rosberg, McGee, & Burgett, 2003, p. 104).

This discussion suggests that leadership today requires the acquisition of skills to work with colleagues. Some of these are consensus skills, some are listening skills, some are team implementation skills, and some are participation skills. In addition, the acquisition of these skills will enable a leader to become far more effective than the leader can imagine.

ABOUT CONSENSUS

In former eras, one person made a decision and passed it down a chain of command, confident that the decision would be implemented in all the correct places. Today, people are reluctant to carry out a decision in which they have had no voice whatsoever. Furthermore, with increased confidence in their own abilities, people believe they have as much wisdom and as valid a perspective as the person at the top. Needless to say, this creates an obvious clash between leadership schooled in making top-down decisions and employees who believe their front-line wisdom is being ignored. The path out of this impasse is teamwork with consensus at its heart.

So, what is consensus? Richard Wynn and C. W. Guditus (1984) take us directly to the dictionary to define it. They remind us that *consensus* comes from the Latin word *consentire*, which means “to think together.” Wynn and Guditus go on to say that the *American College Dictionary* defines *consent* as “general agreement.” Based on this definition, we might say that consensus has something to do with talking and thinking together followed by some form of agreement.

It is crucial for a group to decide just what it will mean by consensus. Will it mean that everyone has to agree to the decision before it is implemented? That as long as everyone can support it, consensus has been reached? That almost everyone has to agree? That a specific percentage agrees? (Schwarz, 2002, p. 112). Groups also need to decide exactly what decisions will be made by consensus and what decisions will be made through another methodology, such as voting. Schwarz (2002) describes a consensus process that keeps everyone on board:

Consensus decision making accomplishes [shared understandings] by ensuring that a decision is not reached until each group member can commit to the decision as his or her own. It equalizes the distribution of power in the group, because every member’s concerns must be addressed and every member’s consent is required to reach a decision. Making a decision by consensus can take more time than other methods, but because people are then internally committed to the decision it will usually take less time to implement effectively. (p. 133)

This statement certainly highlights the advantages of a true consensus process. By listening to all perspectives intently, the group comes up with a decision that honors as much as possible the wisdom of all in the group. Needless to say, this process will require time, but the buy-in and resulting commitment will end up hastening the implementation.

Stanfield (2002) offers a slightly different slant:

There is considerable misunderstanding about the nature of consensus. Most people think it means that everyone agrees.

A consensus articulates the common will of the group. Consensus is a common understanding which enables a group to move forward together. Consensus is reached when all the participants are willing to move forward together, even if they do not agree on all the details. (p. 5)

There is a great deal of tension between pushing forward until everyone is on board and can support a decision and coming to a point where just one or two people are stubbornly refusing to compromise, thus hampering the fundamental will of the group. Perhaps the best one can do in such circumstances is get agreement that the one or two who cannot or will not get on board promise not to sabotage the decision. Later on they may see the benefits of the decision. Often resisters are satisfied if their points of resistance have been clearly stated so that the group understands where they are coming from. Sometimes a question such as "Do we have enough agreement to move ahead together?" allows people to set their concerns aside temporarily and move ahead.

As another authority says, "It is possible for a group member to disagree with a particular decision but consent to support it because:

- The group made a good faith effort to address all concerns raised.
- The decision serves the group's current purpose, values, and interests.
- The decision is one that they can live with, though not their first choice." (Dressler, 2004, p. 4)

Before attempting consensus, it is crucial to determine whether a shared framework has been built with the group. Have all the facts been distributed and discussed? Have the advantages and disadvantages of various approaches and decisions been discussed? Have the insights behind these approaches been talked about? These are important steps for a group to take before it attempts consensus (Kaner, 1996, p. 149).

Consensus is both the process people go through to arrive at a mutually agreed-on decision and the product of such a

process. People who participate in genuine dialogue over an issue, in the midst of real sharing of a variety of perspectives, are often willing to bend their own private opinions and desires in order to arrive at an effective group decision. That final product is a consensus. The process of thinking together, assuring everyone that each perspective is heard, and moving toward a decision is also a consensus.

When we believe that human beings are motivated solely by self-interest, then it is difficult to imagine that consensus can occur. Consensus rests on the assumption that people can voluntarily back away from some aspects of their position in order that some other aspects of their position can be satisfied in a group agreement. Robert Frank (in Mansbridge, 1990) suggests that people can care about more than just their own self-interest. Indeed, it is selling human beings short to say we are motivated only by self-interest.

In addition to whatever drive to self-interest we humans possess, there is also a drive to connect with other human beings. This potential is the foundation of the belief in the possibility of consensus. Consensus could not occur were human beings not able to think and act beyond their self-interest. The desire to connect is strong. It is the experience of feeling connected that positively motivates even those who are cynical and bitter to try one more time to work with a group of people who share issues and concerns.

About the Setting and Logistics for Team Consensus

When I am asked to work with a group, several concrete questions come to mind that may also assist you. Does the room have tables and chairs and not just a theater-style arrangement? Does the room have a working wall? Is the group number between ten and fifty? (More than fifty becomes unwieldy in terms of generating real consensus.) Can you enable as much material to be visual as possible? Other details will emerge as this book unfolds. They can help smooth your journey to consensus.