

Learning on the Run 22: Building Team Consensus

How to improve a team's consensus process while solving a concrete problem?

The Request. The Director of a Regional Forestry R&D Center requested help in developing a 5-year strategic plan, something that the Center had not created before. The Center Director wanted her leadership team to function as a policy making body, formulating center-wide priorities and policies that would best serve the interests of the Center as a whole. She wanted her direct reports to function as a unified board of directors.

Larger Context. The R & D center was divided into different divisions that represented different aspects of forest management and research – Forest Management Systems, Remote Data Sensing, Riparian Restoration, Forest Recreation, Forest Pest Research, Fire Control Strategies, Ecosystem Assessment and Wildlife Biology. The Division Directors and their deputies operated nearly independently of each other. There was even some competition among them for the Center's discretionary funds and available FTE positions. All of these Divisions had "soft" grant money earmarked for particular issues. When they did meet infrequently as a team, they continued in their roles as heads of independent organizations and had difficulty taking a Center-wide perspective. Also, the Division Directors were renowned researchers and would lapse into long involved debates and would use questions to signal their interests.

Consulting Intervention. We developed three multi-day workshops to help the Directors and their Deputies develop and implement a process to set priorities and develop a 5-year cohesive research agenda. At the start, the Center Director set a groundrule that consensus would be the preferred method for team decision making. She also noted that if after several attempts, no consensus emerged, then she and her Deputy would make the decision as to next steps. We took on a developmental facilitation role (1) helping the team take responsibility for improving their decision process together. During the initial workshop, we pointed out the behavioral signals for a consensus process. Also, the team gave written feedback at the end of each day including how to extend or expand their process learnings for the following day. As decisions were being made, we pointed out learning moments as positive examples of consensus and helped them continually add new guidelines and tools that the team might find useful.

Last line: if one of the tasks of a senior leadership team is to improve their decision making together, it is helpful if they understand the behavioral cues that signal an effective consensus process.

(1) For more information on developmental facilitation, see: Schwarz, R. M., *The Skilled Facilitator*. Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco. 1994.