

THE EXTRA POINT

BY JERRY ROBERTS



1102 The Questions Behind Building Consensus

You hear the terminology in business and politics, that it's a good thing to be a consensus builder. That getting together with others can help you come up with the kind of ideas that the majority of people can agree with. But, is there a possible downside to building a consensus? I'm Jerry Roberts and let's look at that, next, on The Extra Point.

Building a consensus of opinion is a tool that is used by many people, in the hopes of arriving at a decision, hopefully sooner rather than later.

In politics, an elected representative who has a project or concept he/she is looking to be supported by colleagues, will do everything possible to convince them they should vote for it.

You see the same thing in business. A leader has an idea for large-scale expansion, and like the politician, reveals it to others to gain their backing before it goes up for consideration.

The idea is to show strength in numbers, which might turn aside differing opinions. Often, when opposition sees that this support is in place, they might just back away.

Some leaders in both the public and private sectors have long been effective consensus builders. It's worked for them and the groups they represent.

Could there be another view of this, one that reveals a potential downside? I read a piece on this a few years back, which I believe came from the Wall Street Journal, and it brought up questions.

Do some leaders look first to build consensus because it's the right thing to do and because they are so good at it, or because they lack the confidence to make the right decision on their own? They fear risking failure.

Are they building consensus, or hiding behind it? Does always seeking consensus have any kind of a negative effect on their problem solving and decision-making skills?

If pushed into a corner by a situation that did not permit time to go after group approval, how would they do?

Maybe you've known leaders who default to consensus building, as well as others who don't give a single thought to asking anybody else what they think. I've known people in both extremes, plus some who dabble a bit in each. I've also known a few who just froze when it became their call. They didn't take any action at all.

I believe consensus can be a useful tool, but I also believe it's important to think an issue through until you're sure you know where you stand — before you seek additional opinions.

Why? Because I trust my instincts, and I will ask myself serious questions to probe my own feelings. That said, I'm always open to hearing a persuasive argument that could change my mind. When you choose to close yourself off to the ideas and opinions of others, you had better be right.

If you haven't got a solid stance on the issue at hand and then try to gain a consensus, all you'll do at the end is simply go along with the majority. That's not leading, it's facilitating. I'm not claiming either one to be better than the other, but I do believe you have to decide which one you are.

So, how do you feel about this? Do you agree that a person whose main tool is consensus building also runs the risk of losing or compromising their ability to make quick and effective decisions, when that becomes necessary?
(Con't.)

Would you say that your personal style is to seek consensus, or do you prefer to make decisions on your own?

That's the Extra Point. Be responsible and make something good happen today. For 93.3 and the Ray Gibson Show, I'm Jerry Roberts.

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