

Confusing Consultation with Consensus

How often do you hear staff complain that 'management told us they wanted to consult about a decision, but then they didn't listen'?

Sometimes the problem is management duplicity; sham consultation to soften people up to an immanent unpopular decision. Almost always, this ploy fails, and it reduces trust in the process.

But often the problem is not duplicity. The real problem is different interpretations about what "consultation" actually means. In particular is it not uncommon for managers and staff both to confuse the terms "consultation" and "consensus". They are quite different notions.

Consider these three options for a manager making a decision:

1. I will decide. I have enough information to do so.
2. I need to decide, but I want further information to help me choose. Give me input before I decide.
3. Let's talk about it so that we can decide collectively.

Option three is an example of consensus. Consensus may lead ultimately to better buy-in to a decision, because it is more democratic. However, consensus takes time (which may not always be available). And consensus can be poor at making hard choices – as the saying goes 'turkeys don't vote for an early Christmas!' Sometimes hard choices are necessary in management, so consensus management is not always better management.

Option two is an example of consultation. Management maintains the right and the responsibility for deciding. It is not a democratic process. Management can encourage input and can listen and can choose not to be influenced by that input.

Of course, if the consultation process is handled well and if the input is skilful, all parties end up more satisfied regardless of the outcome. Unfortunately, the confusion between consensus and consultation is often compounded by the way that managers handle the situation at the outset.

Sometimes they may not have thought through for themselves which option they want, then have to clamp down when the discussion starts to veer into uncomfortable territory.

Often the problem is just sloppy statements at the outset, using vague statements like 'I'd like your input' or 'what are your ideas about X?' without being clear upfront about who will decide.

Management can sensibly choose consensus for some decisions and consultation for others, provided there is clear communication in each circumstance. Without this, management looks inconsistent and their motives will be more open to suspicion.

Finally, there may be insufficient feedback after the decision about why the decision went the way it did, or how the information was valued and used. But the feedback needs to accompany upfront clarity, otherwise it is just after the event sales pitch for the decision.

Conclusions for managers:

- at the outset make it clear who will decide
- make clear the range and limitations of input requested of staff
- after the decision, follow up to explain not only the reasons for the decision, but also what weight was put on the various inputs.

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