

Leaders Need Dissent

As businesses grow the management, the command and control if you will becomes more difficult, not because the business itself is necessarily more complicated but because you reach the point where you can't do everything yourself anymore. The true skill of a leader is not being good at *doing the job*; it's about being good at exercising control through other people and in utilising all of the resources effectively to *get the job done*. In part that's why we see that good leaders are not always good team players, they want to have things done their way.



There is a dilemma here though, one of those paradoxes that make the people issues such an interesting part of business life. A board or management team that just says yes to a leader is rarely successful and companies where this is evident are not usually top performers, at least not in the long term or when the 'going gets tough'. The highest performing companies have boards that are highly contentious and a culture that fosters dissent. No subject is unapproachable and the unthinkable can always be thought. Yet strong leaders are 'wired up' to want things done **their** way.



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In order for dissent to be positive the climate has to be open and trusting and there has to be mutual respect for the abilities of the board members. Successful company boards are like strong social systems, they are able to deal with strongly held beliefs and opposing views without collapse. This trusting, candid and open climate is easy to destroy, one of the most common ways is by a CEO not trusting the board with information and delivering both the problem and the solution in one sentence.

Dissent is then seen as disloyalty and rather than a collective effort to deliver a collective goal you have a grudging acceptance of a decision and no consensus.

It's not simply a case of not using the skills and abilities on the board by railroading your own opinion through that makes for ineffective boards, often people are sat round the boardroom table who are not best placed to do a Directors job. Being an effective Director is a different role to an Operational Manager's role. Very often a place on the board is awarded based on operational excellence or on a CV that has a successful track record in a discipline, but good board members require other attributes. Board members performance should be measured not just by the quantitative results of the departments or discipline they head up, their effectiveness as individuals should also be evaluated. The quality of their thinking and discussion, their passion for the business, the

credibility and relevance of reports, using conflict constructively with other board members and their degree of knowledge are all relevant factors.

Good boards have passionate disagreements that result in new decisions and sometimes new approaches and conclusions. I'd never sit on a board where dissent was discouraged or where the CEO did not know the difference between disagreement and disloyalty but too many managers work their way up the ranks and accept that the seat on the board is a reward. Biting the hand that gave them the reward is unthinkable to these people but they are not doing the job they should if they see their role that way. At the other extreme you see the Director who will argue 'Black is Blue' because they see a board meeting as a debate to be won, an honest evaluation of a Director like this would have to conclude they had lost sight of the whole purpose of a management board.

Non executive Directors are used by many companies to bring skills, experience and views to the table that add value to the thinking and strategy. To truly add value a Non Executive Director has to be sure that he can ask a lot of questions and get answers and that dissent is welcomed. The same should be true of an executive Director. Reputation is always on the line with a board position not to mention the personal legal implications and if you are not joining a group of people who's attitude is 'we think we are bright but we are not the best in the world' then walk away.

Many poor CEO's will point to charismatic business leaders like Richard Branson or Alan Sugar and say that they do not tolerate dissent but that is not true. People like this truly understand the difference between dissent and disloyalty, what they will not tolerate is disloyalty. Neither for that matter will good leaders tolerate underachievement from the command and control within their company, many a failing company has a strong and capable CEO with an underachieving and compliant board.

Great leaders lead great teams and once decisions are made then dissent is not productive but when it comes to thinking things through *if everyone is thinking the same then someone isn't thinking* is a truism. Building a great board is perhaps the most important job a CEO has, but many don't see this. A board should not be a talking shop that exists to exercise the will of the CEO and really strong leaders have to hold themselves back and to some extent modify their natural behaviour. Good leaders want strong team members, poor leaders fear them.

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