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## THE TRAPS OF CONSENSUS-STYLE LEADERSHIP

Most employees favor consensus-run organizations, where a leader uses inclusion and feedback to manage democratically. A consensus-style leader is a refreshing alternative to the tyrant who issues stern orders. But democracy, taken to an extreme, creates numerous frustrations for direct reports.

Leaders who advocate for consensus want everyone to feel valued and happy. These apparent benefits may be dwarfed by their inherent traps, creating the very unhappiness they strive to prevent. Overly inclusive leaders may unwittingly sabotage their efforts.

Consensus-style leaders are seen as mediators or peacekeepers, seeking a calm, cooperative environment. They disdain conflict and disunity, experiencing a sense of well-being only when everyone gets along. They seek to maintain a spirit of togetherness and happiness, going out of their way to ensure people's needs are met.

Unlike tyrants or compulsive leaders, mediators put their people's needs ahead of their own. They accept a more behind-the-scenes role, according to Beatrice Chestnut, PhD, author of *The 9 Types of Leadership: Mastering the Art of People in the 21st Century Workplace* (Post Hill Press, 2017). Peacekeepers don't want prominence or attention, just the satisfaction that everyone is productive, pleased and supportive.

To keep the peace, consensus-style leaders give people equal consideration by seeking their input and concerns. They welcome all ideas and suggestions so the team can come to agreement and keep the majority happy. Leaders mediate disagreements to avoid strife, often forgoing their own preferences and desires. But as Dr. Chestnut explains,

such sacrifices may unintentionally reduce overall team effectiveness, morale and progress.

## ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

Consensus-style leaders offer some significant benefits. They:

- Attempt to understand people's perspectives and needs to ensure they're affirmed and pleased
- Avoid becoming angry to prevent discouragement or upset
- Solicit each person's input and ideas to avoid feelings of exclusion or disillusionment
- Mediate disagreements to help the team find unity and safety
- Give of themselves, often setting aside personal preferences for the common good
- Make themselves available for discussion or assistance
- Help each person contribute to team success without favoritism
- Influence through diplomacy to avoid offending people
- Shrug off personal credit to recognize others
- Avoid blaming others and focus on solutions

As healthy as this work environment may seem, consensus-minded leadership has several potential drawbacks:

- Leaders tend to hold back their opinions to avoid disunity, which diminishes their authority and ability to lead firmly.
- They avoid conflicts they fear may be too difficult to handle, which permits underlying trouble to brew and makes unity tougher to maintain in the long run.
- They take less initiative when outcomes may not sit well with everyone. Passive leaders often miss opportunities for improvement or success.
- They struggle with decisions when they fail to achieve consensus. People may then be reluctant to trust them, especially in tough times.
- Their indecisiveness limits progress, thwarting people's efforts to complete assigned tasks. This causes frustration and disengagement.
- They keep the peace by giving answers they believe people want—but not need—to hear. This misinformation causes errors in direction, judgment and outcomes.

## A message from Nancy...

Let me ask you:

- Are the people on your team engaged and committed or just collecting a pay check?
- Do you have the right people in the right seats on the bus? Are you in the right seat?
- Is the high cost of turnover eating away your organization's bottom-line?
- Are your processes and procedures (or lack thereof) delivering productive and efficient results?
- How comfortable are the members of your senior team managing and leading others?

In today's highly competitive environment, it's no surprise that "what got you here may not get you there."

At Proffitt Management Solutions we are fully committed to providing a unique blend of team and individual development and executive coaching sessions where participants achieve more focus, a sense of purpose, and better results in their leadership roles.

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- They skirt around constructive feedback instead of clearly explaining how employee performance must improve. Substandard work or attitudes go unaddressed, and a lack of corrective actions may threaten the organization's well-being.
- They fail to offer directives when the team incorrectly prioritizes tasks. They discredit their own expertise in a misguided attempt to empower their people, which may compromise goals and progress.
- They disfavor change, especially if it may disrupt the comforting status quo. Organizations may fall behind.
- They ignore their personal needs as they tend to everyone else, thereby inviting fatigue, anger, resentment or burnout.

## DETECTING A CONSENSUS MINDSET

Employees can easily spot behaviors to which consensus-driven leaders may succumb. Problems are sure to arise if too many of these signs are prevalent.

Leaders who consistently struggle to make decisions, especially on issues where the team's view is split, are too democracy oriented. Their tentativeness often encourages organizational stagnation and overarching employee frustration.

Consensus-style leaders tend to agree with everyone in meetings, making excessive attempts to acknowledge each participant's views. Trying to give everyone a positive response takes peacekeeping to a new level, as not every idea has merit or weight. Praising every comment strains credulity and sets the stage for misdirection and misunderstandings.

As these leaders work overtime to provide affirmation, they may unconsciously exhibit subtle sullen behavior or give people the silent treatment. These passive behaviors may stem from resentment, notes Berit Brogaard, PhD, in *5 Signs That You're Dealing with a Passive-Aggressive Person* (Psychology Today, Nov. 13, 2016). Democratic leaders who regularly ignore their preferences or blindly favor team harmony are likely to develop some passive-aggressive tendencies.

Passive-aggressive behavior also surfaces when consensus-style leaders fail to fulfill their commitments. Saying "yes" to a request just to keep the peace often results in an unspoken "no," later to be conveniently attributed to "forgetfulness." Consensus-minded leaders resist suggested changes and are stubborn about initiating them. They want to keep everyone comfortable because it seems to make people happy, and this is their tacit goal.

Peacekeeping leaders seem overly settled and appreciative when disagreements are resolved and will look dismayed or pained when conflicts continue. They make noble efforts to mediate and return the group to harmony, without assigning blame. They may hesitate when asked for their personal viewpoint, making conflict resolution awkward, if not ineffective.

Consensus-driven leaders will deflect attention, preferring to shine the spotlight on their people. They're uncomfortable with traditional levels of power or control and become distressed when issuing firm orders. They try to direct with softer skills and inspire their people with an uplifting, positive approach, making subtle requests seem as harmless as possible. Many democratic leaders prompt their people to volunteer for tasks so no objectionable assignments need to be doled out.

## THE CONSENSUS-DRIVEN CHARACTER

Developing a more effective leadership style begins with understanding how the consensus-style leader thinks and feels.

Those who overvalue consensus and unity identify conflict as their primary source of managerial tension. Disharmony causes them anguish, so the prospect of confrontation troubles them. They work overtime to establish and maintain a peaceful environment, believing that oneness is the only viable way to work—and anything short of it constitutes a problem to be rectified.

Their primary means of maintaining a unified team is to help people meet their needs, keep them positive and cooperative, and affirm



togetherness while dissuading strife. This sometimes means playing the role of mediator or peacekeeper. At other times, it may mean avoiding difficult situations, hoping they'll blow over. Keeping the peace often involves telling people what they want to hear or hiding difficult issues from them. In the moment, the short-term benefits seem to outweigh the potential long-term risks.

## BLIND SPOTS

Leaders who feed off consensus and unity as their primary means of comfort have difficulty seeing the consequences of their behaviors.

Clearly, people are never in continuous harmony. Too many opposing interests prevent long-lived peace and quiet. Ironically, a leader desperate to prevent conflict can actually foment it. Building consensus involves working through and acknowledging disagreements. Skirting them prevents consensus. Leaders fail to realize their efforts can be counterproductive, causing tension and frustration, and quashing group decision-making.

Telling people what they want to hear can be an act of miscommunication. Incorrect information leads to faulty conclusions and improper direction or activities. Leaders fail to see that keeping the peace causes more tension than being truthful and working through the issues. Employees appreciate transparency more than peacekeeping.

Leaders are better trained than their employees to evaluate complex issues. The team's consensus may not offer the best solution. Forgoing authority in an attempt to empower people may severely backfire. Long-term goals are more important than immediate gratification.

Keeping the peace can be exhausting, especially if it means stuffing your preferences or agenda. Consensus-style leaders must accept that it's nearly impossible to prevent all conflicts or outspokenness within the ranks. The peace they think they're preserving may wreak havoc. Being tired, frustrated or anxious quickly ruins a leader's ability to manage people.

## HELPING LEADERS THROUGH CONSENSUS DEPENDENCY

It's often difficult to assess one's own issues, so consensus-style leaders will benefit from professional coaching that pinpoints specific weaknesses.

Learning to accept and work within conflict is key. Leaders who resist conflict must understand its necessity. The best ideas and solutions often hatch from disagreements. If leaders can learn that conflict needn't be painful and that it's actually healthy in the proper proportions, they can use it to their advantage. Minor conflicts won't destroy unity, as leaders may fear, but rather forge it.

Employees want courageous, decisive leaders to pull them through difficult times, especially when conflict arises. Leaders must learn there are times when consensus is beneficial and other times when strong, decisive leadership is the gold standard. One's ability to separate the two determines success. Making the correct call draws people to you, while fumbling puts them off.

Leaders who reveal themselves, who are transparent and passionate, are the most revered; they create the most loyal followers. Holding back your opinions in favor of team feedback has its place and time, but people want a real leader they can know, trust and learn from. Consensus-style leaders need to project a leader's persona that blends the proper levels of humility, courage, wisdom, insight and confidence. Your people won't sense these attributes if you fail to express them.

As consensus-style leaders overcome their inhibitions, their strength will shine through, and unity will be stronger than ever.