

## **Is Managing Dissent a Required Modern-Day Leadership Quality?**

**You can't pick up a newspaper or turn on the television news lately without being** bombarded by polarized points of view on a host of subjects: climate change, immigration, universal healthcare and fracking, to name just a few.

It seems everyone has an opinion on divisive issues and often, opinions can be diametrically opposed. But is there a way to meet somewhere in the middle and, if so, how is that accomplished?

Writer Bill Taylor tackles this issue to some extent in his recent *Harvard Business Review* (HBR) article, **“True Leaders Believe Dissent Is an Obligation,”** citing recent news regarding ethics problems at both Volkswagen and Wells Fargo. In both cases, senior managers in these organizations established a work climate where inappropriate behavior and decisions were condoned. As a result, two CEOs lost their jobs.

I feel sure the issues in question came up during meetings, and there must have been people in the meeting room who knew the decisions being made were wrong. Yet, no one spoke up.

Why?

When I was with Anheuser-Busch (A-B), we held annual communications meetings, during which the floor was opened for questions following **a presentation on the company's** performance and planned activities for the coming year. Employees could ask whatever they **wanted, but it was an unspoken rule that you should only venture into “safe” or “informational” queries.**

We conducted a similar communications meeting in China a few years later, while I was working in the A-B international division. There, the questions were fast, furious and far-reaching.

One topic was posed by an hourly worker, who asked about the ability to purchase shares of company stock. That question led to a big project, in which the company made stock - previously only available domestically - accessible to all international employees.

Why did two divisions of the same company, conducting the same annual meetings, have two very different sets of behavior?

In his HBR article, Taylor writes that, “very few people have the guts to dissent, very few people become fearless, because very few leaders emphasize and celebrate their obligation to do so.” He also cites leadership expert and former MIT professor Edgar Schein, who believes it takes a special kind of humility to welcome dissent, and that a humble approach is a rare quality among leaders.

What happens to opinionated employees when they show up for work at your company? They aren’t likely to feel any less opinionated while they’re on the clock.

But some environments and organizations give off a certain strong vibe - your opinion is not welcome here - so, naturally, even the most passionate people may keep their opinions to themselves.

**So, what is a leader’s obligation to encourage dissent? There are numerous studies that support the idea that teams and organizations produce far better results when different points of view or opinions are heard and incorporated into the final solution.**

That might be easier said than done for some. So, how do you do that effectively?

Here are some tips:

1. *Clearly define the problem.* Defining a situation and describing the boundaries can provide clarity.
2. *Listen.* Engage in active listening, where you must restate what others have just said.
3. *Encourage differing opinions.* Invite contrary views to the ones previously stated.
4. *Allow all opinions to be heard.* Note: You may need to set a time limit on input.
5. *Develop a set of criteria* by which to evaluate solutions. This can connect back to the first tip, when defining the problem.
6. *Invite people to create a hybrid solution* using various pieces of input. This can create coalitions - that otherwise would not be formed - around an issue.
7. *Create a team of diverse thinkers.* Ensure people with different points of view are part of the group implementing the solution.
8. *Set an expectation of commitment.* Require everyone on the solution team to commit to making the solution successful.
9. *Conduct a post-project evaluation* to determine how well the solution addressed the problem and how it could be improved going forward.

In a world that seems to be moving toward extremes, leaders need to possess skills that invite and promote dissent as a way to achieve a better overall solution, which could lead to

a more successful company where employees - who feel their insights are valued - are more productive and loyal than they might be otherwise.

### About the Author

*David Hoff is the chief operation officer and executive vice president for leadership development at E•A•S•I-Consult®. E•A•S•I-Consult works with Fortune 500 companies, government agencies, and mid-sized corporations to provide customized Talent Management solutions. E•A•S•I-Consult specialties include individual assessment, online employment testing, survey research, competency modeling, leadership development, executive coaching, 360-degree feedback, online structured interviews, and EEO hiring compliance. The company is a leader in the field of providing accurate information about people through professional assessment. To learn more about E•A•S•I-Consult, visit <https://easiconsult.com> or email [ContactUs@easiconsult.com](mailto:ContactUs@easiconsult.com) or call 800.922.EASI.*