



Gaining Agreement Leads to Alignment

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Imagine this: Your team leaves its meeting with everyone excited about your discussion and direction. But then nothing happens. The commitments that you thought were in place never materialize into action. Or worse, team members act in ways that are contrary to the direction agreed upon. As excitement turns into another good idea gone bad, you and the team wonder what went wrong.

Sound familiar? The issue may not be about conflict or even a lack of accountability. Instead, you may be dealing with a failure to gain a clear agreement and ensure alignment of priorities and actions. The inability to effectively reach and manage team agreement is one of the most important challenges every leader faces at some point. It diminishes engagement and enthusiasm, and it inhibits focused action that leads to consistent results.

Detecting an Agreement Problem

The signs of team conflict are obvious and may include open disagreement, undermining the success of others, and passive-aggressive comments couched in humor. However, the indicators of a problem with agreement are more subtle. Look for these signs:

- Team members interpret what they hear differently and in their own way.
- Follow-through is lacking; people believe that others have the responsibility for action.
- Alignment is missing; everyone does something different in pursuit of what they believe to be the correct path.
- Collective decisions are made that conflict with what individuals know to be correct.
- A lack of accountability is demonstrated by blaming others for our predicament.

Keys to Avoiding Problems

Mismanaged agreement leads to misalignment of priorities and misguided expectations. You can avoid these by taking these three actions:

Create a shared vision and shared expectations. Shared vision and expectations ultimately answers the question of what we collectively want to be or do at a given point in time. Like the compass needle that consistently points north, a shared vision and expectations will point team members in the right direction when they wonder what to do next.

The key word to remember here is “shared.” You can mandate compliance, but people volunteer their commitment when they have a vested interest in the goal. There are times when you, as the leader, are expected to come forward with a vision and plan to achieve it. But the better alternative, especially with a team of volunteers such as an IRWA committee, is to involve everyone in setting the shared direction. You can blend the two approaches by laying out your broad vision and expectations and involving the team to determine the best implementation plan.

Build consensus around the course of action and decisions. When it comes to leading a team, the decision-making approach of last resort is counting the votes. While there may be times when taking a vote is required, the best leaders use consensus to craft a final decision that everyone can support. Consensus requires patience, perseverance, and the willingness to engage in constructive give and take. The extra effort is worth it – people will support what they help create.

Ensure a clear understanding of and accountability for responsibilities. The number one reason leaders fail to gain agreement is that they never really ask others whether they buy-in to a specific

course of action. Make sure that you do the following with every decision:

- 1) Review the decisions and agreements to ensure that everyone has heard and agreed to the same things, and
- 2) Confirm next steps and any follow-up plans. Remember to be as specific as possible.

At the end of every meeting, add these steps to ensure that everyone is on the same page:

- 3) Express your confidence that the expectations will be met and your appreciation for the efforts your team members will make to meet them.
- 4) Document the decisions and accountabilities. What is written is remembered.

When Conflict Occurs

Despite your best efforts, conflict may be inevitable. When it arises, make sure to resolve it in a way that makes the individual feel valued as a team member. A positive approach to conflict supports your efforts to gain agreement.

Agreement enables alignment. Alignment creates focus. Focus generates action toward meaningful results. And at the end of the day, leaders are defined by their results.

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