

## Engaging people in your space

You are trying to mobilize members of your administration or staff toward a common goal. With the busyness that characterizes so much of institutional life, it is easy to do this work on the fly. You have done it before, it does not require a lot of effort, and you know the people well.

On the surface, this approach seems acceptable, but it runs significant risks — risks because of a lack of intentionality and purpose. If we do not plan carefully, the chances of a satisfactory outcome lessen. Not only may we miss the desired goal in the project, but we may also alienate and frustrate our colleagues.

*The Senior Leadership Team has been discussing a move to a four-day workweek for the staff, with no reduction in compensation, but longer hours on the other four working days. There are many issues involved in this decision, and you have been asked to meet with the staff to get their input.*

Let me propose four questions that need to be asked both before and during this process, to maximize the best outcome.

### 1. What is your typical leadership style, and what style is required in this situation?

When you have a particular decision to make, the 'what' is clear. You know the issue, you understand its implications for the institution, and you realize that it will impact the community. But if the 'how' does not receive equal attention, the decision-making process may go awry.

What is your typical leadership style? This list of six is a standard paradigm of distinct approaches that characterize different leaders.

- **Coercive.** I will give you the orders, but do not ask a lot of questions.
- **Authoritative.** I will give you the goal, but you decide how to get there.
- **Affiliative.** I will build harmony and morale and help us all work together.
- **Democratic.** I will give everyone a voice and an equal vote.
- **Pacesetter.** I will function with high standards and expect you to follow.
- **Coaching.** I will work closely with you ensuring you are doing things well.

How will you lead this process? What is your go-to leadership approach, whatever may be under consideration? Having an awareness of our leadership style allows us then to reflect on the relationship of the 'how' and the 'what.' Given the topic, is your usual style going to accomplish what is required, or do you need to pivot and use a different approach? Sorting this through ahead of time will maximize the likelihood that the 'how' will facilitate a helpful process.

*You are a democratic leader who likes to give everyone a voice and a vote, but you realize in this situation that is not what the Senior Leadership Team desires. You decide to lead the meeting more authoritatively by indicating that the purpose of the meeting is to determine the pros and cons of this decision and to see if there are alternative strategies.*

## **2. What is it you are looking for in the group that you are leading?**

One of the reasons meetings become confusing or off-topic is because of a lack of clarity on what is expected from the group. Even when we are clear on our own leadership mode, there can be a mismatch with a group who thought you were approaching them so they could decide this, or negate that, or contribute in some other way.

Four options are possible:

- **Controlling.** I take all the power and do not give you any power in the decision.
- **Consultation.** I give away some power to help me assess, but I retain the power to decide.
- **Collaboration.** I give away some power to help me assess, and we all have the power to decide together without complete agreement.
- **Consensus.** I give away most of the power to assess, and we all need to agree on the decision.

When a leader is not explicit about what is expected from a group, she will soon realize that she has miscalculated. If a group believes that this decision is going to be made by consensus, but then finds out that this is a straightforward consultative process, frustration will emerge.

Sometimes this breaks down because the leader does not know what they want from the group, and they give double messages. 'I want to hear what you have to say,' followed by 'I will decide on my own,' will create tension in the group and a less-than-ideal decision-making process.

*The staff is not being asked to make a decision, but to raise the pros and cons and potential alternatives. You indicate that this is a consultative process and the Senior Leadership Team will make the decision at a later date.*

### 3. What length and number of meetings are required?

One of the challenges for leaders is determining the length and number of meetings that are required to complete a particular project. Cyril Parkinson, a British historian with Civil Service in the 1950s, had his name linked with this “law”: *Work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion.*

Have you noticed how many meetings in your institution never end early? Parkinson’s Law can explain that. If you hold a one-hour session, you can assume that the proceedings will run right up to the 60-minute mark. Two- and three-hour meetings are similar.

Multiple meetings are no different. When you decide to meet three times to make a decision, all of that time will be used and there may even be a request for a fourth meeting.

The principle is simple. Once you set the length and number of meetings, whatever they may be, the work will fill up the time.

But if we come at Parkinson’s Law from another direction, it means we can set a time that seems appropriate to the topic and the schedule of the participants. Rather than picking a traditional meeting length, like one or two hours, the leader can select a time that seems sufficient for the discussion and respectful of those involved.

*You determine that one meeting, lasting 80 minutes, will provide enough preliminary information for the Senior Leadership Team. But you do indicate that people can give you further information personally or through social media and that there may be another meeting for further discussion.*

### 4. What are your goals within the meeting(s)?

Once there is clarity on leadership style, what is expected of the group, and the length and number of meetings, it is then appropriate to establish goals within the session. What is it you want to accomplish in the meeting? What do you need from the group? Is there a cascading set of decisions that requires prioritizing?

I have found the work of Edward De Bono (online at <https://www.debonogroup.com/services/core-programs/six-thinking-hats/>) helpful in this regard. Using the concept of a hat, he argues that six colored hats can be worn in a meeting. The task of the leader is to declare which hat is needed at different points in the deliberation.

- **Blue — Process.** What is the plan for action?
- **White — Facts.** What do I know?
- **Red — Feelings.** What am I feeling?
- **Green — Creativity.** What are the alternatives?
- **Yellow — Benefits.** What are the positives?
- **Black — Cautions.** What are the dangers?

At various points, all of these postures need to be heard. It is important to listen to the emotive passion on the subject, but we also need to look at the facts, weigh up the benefits, and note the cautions. Those who bring a creative edge need the floor, as do those who bring attention to the process embedded in the discussion. If the leader is not declarative on what she is looking for, one hat may take over, and the whole meeting moves in that direction. Many of us have anguished memories of those kinds of meetings.

As the leader reflects on the topic and the desired outcome, he can then determine what hats are needed to contribute to the desired end. The result is that the verbal space is shared, and the discussion is multifaceted. And it may be that more than one meeting is needed because three of the hats need to take the lead in the first, and three others in the second.

In a group where there is a strong “know and be known” component, certain people are prone to wear particular hats, and they can be called on to provide those perspectives. Alternately, everyone can be asked to put on a specific color and contribute from that vantage point.

*You start the meeting by spending ten minutes providing the process and the facts, and then divide the time up into four equal segments of fifteen minutes — feelings, benefits, cautions, and creativity. The remaining ten minutes allows people to go back to any of the hats or raise any final questions.*

Engaging people in your space to accomplish a particular task does not just happen. Thoughtful responses to these four questions will not only maximize efficiency, but they will also produce more engaged staff.

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