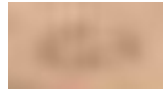


How To Make Progress When No One Agrees

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(Hint: Consensus is not the goal)

All of us—even those with the best perception—are always somewhat out of touch with the exact state of the world we live in. Today, every business is living in a time of great change, and the chasm between what leaders and employees believe about the state of things seems to be widening.

[The State of Inbound](#), for example, found large discrepancies between how leaders and employees rate marketing effectiveness, and what tactics they believe are the most effective—from new marketing channels to sales strategies.

A simplistic response to this tension might be to argue that leaders need to be more realistic and ground themselves in the everyday realities confronting the average employee. Equally simplistic is the pressure for employees to get in alignment with the leadership's goals. **But perhaps a different mindset is needed for everyone across the spectrum: resilience.**

The company has to make progress even when CEOs have lost faith in cold calling, but the sales staff has not. Or when marketers want to increase investment in blogging, while the CMO thinks they should be creating more YouTube videos. To pursue consensus is a guarantee that an organization will move slowly, creating frustration and dysfunction at every level of the company.

Adopting resilience, however, is a strategy for making progress without the need for consensus.

But the pursuit of resilience over consensus is a new muscle for most organizations. How can companies make progress when different teams and different people have different views on the state of things? How much dissent is beneficial, making the company more resilient and better positioned in a hard-to-predict world, and where does it cross over into obstruction and disunity?

I posed these thoughts to a group of colleagues, asking them to consider these questions. Their responses reveal a new path forward for teams willing to prioritize progress over consensus.

Consensus is easier, but less effective

[Esko Kilpi](#), a leading voice on the future of work, offered his thoughts, reflecting on the notion of getting more people involved, sharing their perceptions, and why that's good for the business.

“Paradoxically, engaging more people requires more from managers than the current management paradigm.”

“When the circle of involvement is larger many changes occur. When people see where they fit in the bigger picture they are able to see the interdependencies and are able to respond much, much faster to changing conditions. Our research shows that transparent processes are more than four times faster than corresponding processes where people just see their own part.”

Esko observed that organizations are inherently complex systems, and that they require ‘continuous, responsive coordination to be effective’. So perhaps resilience and a tolerance for dissenting views isn't some abstract property of organizational culture, but is instead the outcome of close attention on activities that keep us responsive to each other.

And Esko makes the leader's case for harnessing dissent:

“The leader who isolates himself from dissenting opinions is bound to make disastrous decisions. The role of the effective leader is to widen and deepen communication. Leadership is participating and exercising skills of conversation which uncorrupts information, keeps the necessary paradoxes alive, and keeps on opening up the possibility of new meaning rather than closing down the further development of thought.”

Esko's views are a reflection of the affirmation of creative uncertainty, and the foundational idea that we should always lean towards approaches that open possibilities and alternatives rather than approaches that limit them. By saying that the leader must ‘keep necessary paradoxes alive’, Esko makes clear that we are living in a time of dilemmas, not simple answers.

Self-aware managers know they don't know everything

[Celine Schillinger](#), Sanofi-Pasteur's head of quality innovation and engagement, makes the case that broader diversity in viewpoints internally is the path toward best meeting the needs of diverse customers:

“Only by reflecting the broadest diversity of available competences and viewpoints internally, will the

| *business be able to satisfy the diversity of its customers.”*

Celine positions this goal in the context of managerial evolution. She says:

| *“Managers don’t necessarily have to know and decide everything. We teach them to ‘let go’ and to appreciate to be surprised by their staff’s initiatives (not easy for all of them). Trust, support, help, enable... instead of control, which is not an efficient use of our managerial resources.”*

So, another angle on resilience, or maybe its most critical aspect, is self-awareness. The self-aware leader accepts that they don’t know everything. They accept the stretch within themselves between uncertain and certain, and they embrace the consequences.

Celine views dissent as playing a key role in this evolution, and not as something to be tolerated grudgingly, but as an inescapable element of an uncertain world:

| *“People act without necessarily asking for authorization—meaning that the possibility of dissent is accepted. We don’t try to eliminate it, because the benefits of autonomy are much greater than the drawbacks of dissent.*

| *People co-create without necessarily aiming at a consensus—our [leaning toward a] consensus culture is very strong, leading to a lengthy decision process that kills innovation. We [now] support a new way where if you have an idea, and can make it happen, then do make it happen. Only a better idea from someone able to make it happen is accepted. Mere criticism is not.”*

Celine’s final formulation—where the soft veto of criticism is understood to be illegitimate—is a great insight, and is another aspect of the stretchiness of resilient organizations. Dissent is welcome, but dissent without action is not legitimate enough to stop progress.

Deep trust is essential

[Euan Semple](#) is a [writer and consultant](#) with a deep appreciation for the human aspect of organizations. It came as no surprise that Euan focused on trust as the key ingredient for resilience:

| *“The only way to deal with the increasing unpredictability and volatility of the workplace is to build on, and enhance, our existing networks. Networks of people who trust each other are the fastest way to share information.”*

But adopting the superficial aspects of effective businesses that bridge these gaps in perceptions won’t build the deep networks of trust needed. As Euan says, just adopting the superficial aspects of nimble, flexible organizations —‘growing hipster beards’, as he puts it—isn’t enough.

Euan sees a conflict between risk-averse and more innovative ways of thinking:

“We need to find a way to cultivate the mindset that allows managers to enable their staff to form and maintain effective networks. These networks need to be made up of autonomous, smart, tolerant, and committed individuals. Most corporate environments have cultivated easily managed, compliant, cautious, risk-averse individuals. Transitioning from one world view to the other is where our real attention has to be focussed.”

Euan is focused on the tug-of-war between those holding onto the past and those pushing hard into an imagined future. Embracing both sides of this apparent conflict is the central dilemma of a resilient organization.

I have no doubt that a great deal of ‘organizational change’ initiatives run aground on that dilemma, operating on the unspoken premise that those inclined to hold onto the risk-averse past are ‘wrong’, and need to be converted or shown the door. But the more difficult course is to have everyone stretch their assumptions, and make room for that dilemma instead of trying to kill it off.

Needed: leaders with a holistic mindset

[Ayelet Baron](#) is a well-known [writer and speaker](#), who starts out by considering the changing role of leadership:

“The biggest change we need in business today is one of mindset. What is desperately needed is a new type of leader who possesses common sense, values life and has a holistic mindset of integration.”

Perhaps ‘holistic’ in this sense represents that acceptance of diversity of views. Perhaps every individual in the organization—not just leadership—has to learn to trust themselves, Ayelet suggests that before dissent can be commonplace:

“The three biggest currencies for this century are trust, relationships, and community. What no one ever teaches us is to trust ourselves. As people of all ages find their voice and choose themselves... we will do the right thing regardless where we are in the organizational structure.”

Ayelet implores us to embrace a new perspective, a conscious application of new values, grounded in asking ourselves what we want, what is our purpose in life and work, and weaving together a richer fabric for the resilient organization from deeper trust, relationships, and a sense of community.

The new way of work means not waiting for someone to tell you what to do

[Brian Solis](#) is a world-acclaimed author, speaker, and advisor—and one of my dearest friends—who positions my provocation relative to the mind-bending transitions that challenge leaders today:

“The question is, to what extent does dissonance affect operational performance and potential in an era of digital Darwinism? If technology and society evolve, do businesses operate in unison enough to progress or does fractured or even divergent communication, purpose and efforts slow or completely hinder competition?”

Brian gets to the heart of the question, and zeroes in on the mindset of today's leader, confronted by a world of future shock:

"Because many executives are caught in either a state of future shock and/or are so caught up with delivering shareholder or stakeholder value quarter-to-quarter, the ability to lead digital transformation or innovation is constrained as a function of everyday out-of-touchness. But that's still not an excuse. Times, tastes and behaviors change. Ignorance plus arrogance can only equate to irrelevance.

What we're really talking about is not just functional dissonance but the need for real change and evolution in mindset and beliefs to survive and thrive. We all can attest that the need for change is easier to dismiss than it is to embrace. It's only natural for people to only want to see a convenient lie rather than an inconvenient truth."

Brian echoes Ayelet in his call for individuals to step up and take risks, regardless of where they sit in the organization:

"If you're waiting for someone to tell you what to do, you're on the wrong side of innovation. This is less about inspiring a resistance as it is about aligning people around a greater good for everyone inside and outside the organization."

This is a powerful statement and I will likely paraphrase Brian for years to come:

If you're waiting for someone to tell you what to do, you're on the wrong side of the new way of work.

Taken to its logical conclusion, smart companies will be built on the premise that people won't wait, shouldn't wait, to be told what to do: they will make decisions, take action, move forward. And the company will need to stretch—at a foundational level—to accept that degree of agility and flex, across the board. **It's not that every individual needs to agree on everything about the business, or even the best next move, but we all need to agree that disagreement is a key element of how high-performing teams operate.**

Dissent as the force multiplier

Perhaps the largest change in the deepening of today's culture of work relative to the shallower work culture of ten years ago is a commitment to diversity. This starts with expanding the demographics of who's included in discussions and decisions, but the end result is a workplace that is comfortable with different viewpoints, opinions, and approaches.

It's that attitude, the recognition that differing viewpoints and dissent, can be a force multiplier when considered as the basis for resilience—that will typify the most successful companies of the near future and beyond.

We each start with the existential 'still point of the turning world', ourselves. Or as Brian Solis put it: **"Each of us does not see the world as it really is, we see it with us at the center of everything."** And in many ways, the pursuit of consensus is the pursuit to get everyone to see the world as we see it—an impossible and pointless goal.

A better goal is the pursuit of resilience, cultivating the stretch and flex needed to accept the views of others, and

make progress not only in spite of, but also because of dissent.

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