

Constructive controversy

Business, Management



Constructive controversy is a process through which two individuals or groups of individuals seek to reach an agreement when their ideas, opinions and information are incompatible to those of the other (Johnson, Johnson and Tjosvold, 2006). The process is based on a strong cooperative goal and involves “ deliberate discourse [of the advantages and disadvantages of proposed actions] aimed at synthesizing novel solutions” (Johnson, Johnson and Tjosvold, 2006, p. 1). Participants cope constructively in conflict situations by using differences in understanding, perspective and knowledge as valued resources to find a solution integrating the best thoughts that emerge during the process (Deutsch, 2006). In an organizational context, skillful participation in constructive controversy can lead to higher-quality decisions and solutions to complex problems.

During the role play of the ROC case study in class, some participants reflected that while they felt thrown out of equilibrium initially when asked to assume the opposite position, the process opened their minds to new information and helped them engage in a higher-level cognitive and reasoning process. The value of constructive controversy lies in the thought process it induces when participants adapt to and accommodate the perspective of the other (Johnson, Johnson and Tjosvold, 2006). Individuals are more likely to derive conclusions that are enriched by new ideas and information which otherwise may not have been taken into consideration.

Coming together to create a solution in the constructive controversy process also fosters stronger relationships among individuals which is crucial to organizational health. The positive feelings and commitment individuals feel in joint decision-making raises interpersonal attraction and produces greater

perceptions of peer task support (Johnson, Johnson and Tjosvold, 2006).

Individuals are encouraged to manage conflict constructively when the next problem arises and the result is likely to be a higher-quality solution, thereby reinforcing interpersonal attraction and commitment in the organization for the long term.

In the ROC case study, the Finance team and the Sales team will likely need to cooperate in the long term to come up with multiple creative solutions to bring ROC back to the black again because sustained profitability cannot be achieved with cost-cutting measures alone or by simply launching a new product. The bedrock of this long-term cooperative effort to revive ROC is a positive relationship between the two teams. However, the constructive controversy process requires dedicated time and resources, which in some situations, may not be the most efficient way of decision-making.

In fast-paced, complex and highly dynamic business environments, organizations have to respond swiftly to changing customer demands in order to compete. While the constructive controversy process can generate higher-quality decisions, the timeliness of these decisions is equally crucial. ROC would have suffered a lost opportunity if a rival company had launched a similar product in the time taken for the two teams in ROC to arrive at a decision through the constructive controversy process.

Controversies may also increase tensions in a group if participants do not possess the collaborative and conflict management skills necessary to facilitate a constructive controversy process. According to Johnson, Johnson and Tjosvold (2006), the abilities to disagree with each other's ideas while

acknowledging one another's personal competence and engage in perspective-taking behaviors are critical to creating a cooperative context for controversy.

A group comprising mainly of individuals with a dominating style of conflict management is likely to experience a competitive controversy process, with each side adhering rigidly to its position and rejecting ideas and information of the opponent. Dominating persons often ignore the needs and expectations of the other party and may sometimes want to win at any cost (Rahim, 2000). As a result, interpersonal relationships could be strained and more conflicts may arise.

References

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