Achieving TRUE CONSENSUS

By Rod Napier with Patrick Sanaghan

Editor's Note: NACUBO's latest release, *Intentional Design and the Process of Change: Strategies for Successful Change*, to be published this month, offers both theory and practice to help guide your change efforts. This excerpt is from Part 1 of the book, which examines the process of change. Part 2 provides intentional designs for holding successful meetings. (An excerpt from Part 2, "Making Tomorrow's Meeting Much More Effective," appeared in the December 2001 issue of *Business Officer.*)

Problems in the process of change most often arise when those who must eventually live with the needed changes fail to embrace them because of inadequate training, education, involvement, or ownership of the proposed solution itself.

Overcoming resistance results largely from engaging those involved in such activities as

1. assessing the need for the proposed change;
2. being able to influence the change process itself;
3. identifying and evaluating the available choices;
4. being privy to current information or being kept in the loop;
5. assessing best practices and benchmarking other organizations;
6. strategizing how to implement the necessary strategies of change; and
7. monitoring and evaluating the outcomes of the various change initiatives.

For people to embrace the implications of a collaborative approach, it is essential that the institution models collabora-

"Anyone disagree? (Pause) Well, I guess we have consensus." To prevent yet another "false consensus"—in which the unspoken disagreements are submerged, only to arise at the point of implementation—learn the four keys to a true consensus.

tion on a daily basis spread over time. Collaboration is not something to be thrown on the process as a stand-alone gimmick to simply get people involved and, hopefully, to create instant credibility. To be successful, collaboration needs to be part of how business is done, day after day, month after month. People believe what they experience. When leaders rush to get people involved at the time of the change initiative itself, skeptics and supporters alike feel as if the process is synthetic—a kind of strategic manipulation in the name of openness and participation. In most cases, the success of the collaborative methodologies themselves will depend on the level of trust that exists and the degree to which collaborative methods are used in less demanding and stressful times.

The relatively recent idea (in the past 30 years) of "getting all of the voices in the room" to explore alternatives and their consequences has resulted in new approaches for building solutions which, at one time, would have only been discussed behind closed doors. At the core is the belief that without real participation and greater transparency of ideas and information, most change efforts will be undermined and many will be rendered useless.

However, even in the honest effort to become more transparent and to engage relevant constituencies in the problem-solving process, results are often less than satisfactory. For example, consensus is one of the handles of new management that is blithely used—and abused—in the leader's arsenal of collaborative management practices. True consensus is difficult to achieve, but the results are worthwhile.

Aligned With the Stars

Consider Middlebury College's case. By anyone's standards, the changes that occurred on this small Vermont campus in the eight years prior to the millennium were astounding. In 1992, the campus had emerged from an extended period of stability—some would say complacency. A long-serving and respected president had left, to be replaced by a person who only lasted one year. The next choice was an "acting" president from among the faculty ranks—someone who understood the traditions and culture of the institution and, apparently, understood what it would take to mobilize change on a campus that was reluctant to question its past and reassess its future.

In the early years of this period of reassessment and change, the focus was on two critical needs. The first was to explore the guiding principles of the institution, to get the various constituency groups on the same page in relation to what had made Middlebury unique and where it needed to move in the future. On a campus where there is, among many people, an unabashed love for the institution, the very act of raising such hard questions was threatening. Yet, over time, faculty, staff, and students revisited all of their assumptions about education, then carved out the guiding principles that would drive the second major event—a boldly framed 10-year plan. The plan was sufficiently broad so that it could focus the attention of the campus, yet not so narrow that it would create divisions even before the necessary re-education of its many stakeholders could occur.

Having listened for months to broad-ranging discussions of values and educational purposes, the president and a few key

TAKE THIS TEST

Following are questions that test the principles underlying successful collaboration.

1. Do the top leaders of the organization act collaboratively in dealing with one another and in a manner that provides parity in the eyes of the rest of the campus?

2. Is "transparency" as a concept promoted on an institutional level?

3. Are substantive issues delegated to task forces, committees and councils for problem solving and decision making?

4. Are financial decisions given over to decision-making groups?

5. Is "consensus," as a vehicle for decision making, real or simply a tool to push through quick decisions in a conflict-averse system?

6. Has the group or community taken the time to develop a set of core values (no more than four or five) that act as a filter for determining what is important to the organization?

7. Similarly, is there a clear mission statement clarifying exactly who the organization is — its real place in the education marketplace?

8. Is there a compelling vision of where the organization is going and where it wants to be in relation to a number of expansive goals?

9. Does the reward system clearly reward individuals for active participation in the collaborative domain of the organization's work?

10. Are the use of pilot studies and experimental programs encouraged as a means of testing ideas?

11. Are there opportunities for interested stakeholders in large and small open meetings to discuss issues critical to the communities?

12. Are efforts made to expand the information available to those engaged in the change effort through a systematic review of best practices as well as carefully constructed benchmarking efforts either within the organization or outside?

leaders forged a compelling vision of the future that identified needs more than solutions. It left the larger community with the responsibility to define the specifics and struggle with the details that would or would not change the critical aspects of institutional life. It was the positive outcome of these discussions—the feeling of being truly heard—that provided the trust necessary to move ahead into the more substantive areas of change.

To Grow or Not to Grow

One of the sacred cows of most small colleges is the belief that growth dilutes quality and, in the process, pollutes the unique learning environment that only small size can provide. To many at Middlebury, the thought of 350 new students being merged into the picturesque campus of 2,000, as proposed in the plan, was not only repugnant but flew in the face of a vocal minority who actually wanted to reduce the current size.

A True Understanding of Consensus

What followed was an extraordinary example of living the values of real consensus—the moving of a community toward agreements drawn from thorough discussion; education combined with a demonstrated respect for ideas and new ways of thinking. The college's struggle toward consensus was predicated on the view that individuals are in search of what is best for the institution rather than in search of justification of individual positions.

The truth is that consensus rarely works, especially among a large number of highly differentiated stakeholders—in this case, faculty, students, administrators, and alumni. Could the campus live its principles, or would the process deteriorate, as is so often the case, into an exhausting struggle, finally resulting in decision by attrition or—worse yet—a stalemate? The positions of the various groups were carefully heard, and the benefits of growth were weighed against the cost of the status quo or the benefits of reducing the current size.

The effort to build consensus became a learning experience for those involved and demonstrated the meaning of civility and collegiality. People let go of their rigidly held beliefs and demonstrated a willingness to change their fervently held positions. This stimulated trust in the process and each other. As individuals put aside their personal interests in favor of what appeared to be best for the college, the community drew together. During the college-wide debate, the faculty vote shifted dramatically until well over 80 percent of the stakeholders supported the notion of growth.

The Next Even Bigger Test

An even greater test awaited the community in its desire to build a stronger place for student education. In l997, the leadership proposed that residential life change from an integrated model to one of small, differentiated learning communities modeled after Yale and similar institutions. This issue could have blown apart a less committed educational community. There was a clear understanding that any eventual decision of such magnitude would require the support of students, faculty, and staff. The debate lasted 15 months. While it was not pretty, the dedication to learn about the issues remained paramount. Mixed task forces visited campuses utilizing similar approaches. Best practices were sought and experts' advice solicited. In the end, large numbers of students, faculty, and staff saw the sense of such learning communities; and each group, independently, registered support of the proposition at a level of greater than 80 percent.

Would such an elaborate consensus-building process work in higher education institutions where faculty are less committed to the values and culture of their institution? When time or information are lacking, a consensus process in the name of collegiality can be divisive and futile. Add to this the reality that many institutions are conflict averse and the alignment found here does not occur. Middlebury's case shows that with patience, experience, and good information—along with a desire to put the interest of the institution ahead of individual needs—the result can be powerful change leading toward an even more cohesive community.

Why Consensus Usually Fails

Building consensus in a large group can be a time-consuming and trying process. Even when working with small groups or teams, the consensus-building process can be fraught with problems. How many times has a well-intentioned leader said, "Anyone disagree? (Pause) Well, I guess we have consensus." The result: another "false consensus" in which the unspoken disagreements are submerged, only to arise later at the point of implementation. Long gone will be the understanding that the failure to gain *true* agreement months before would cost the institution heavily later.

Following are four demands of an effective consensus process. If they are absent, failure is likely to occur.

- **Discussions cannot be rushed**. Consensus demands that all voices are heard. However, in an adversarial climate participants sometimes are unwilling to give up the floor so others can be heard. In the rare situation, when collegiality is truly working, there is a search for truth, for the answer or idea that will lead to the "best" solution possible. In a world where everyone is pressed—where time, for some, is the most precious of commodities—there is often impatience and even intolerance for a process that can demand so much from its participants.

- **Consensus requires aggressive seeking of all information essential to the decision**. This necessitates a willingness for opponents to embrace ideas that may be foreign to their position, to weigh them, and, then, to decide their value. In the usual win-lose climate created by the dialectic at many university and colleges, the goal is not to access all relevant information, but, rather, to discount any information that is not supportive of one's position. Instead of sincerely supporting a discussion of ideas, lines are drawn and combat ensues. As individuals witness the goal of winning overriding the goals that are best for the institution, the battle often results in a loss of trust. This can drive an open discussion of ideas into a win-lose spiral where the common ground so essential in consensus building is thrown out.

- **Consensus is built on the ability of those participating to conflict—often with passion—while maintaining respect for their colleagues and their positions.** The ability to have "the good fight" in a civil manner, over time, builds respect. Middlebury demonstrates this point. Witnessing people argue with deep conviction and emotions and, then, alter their position to incorporate new information, is at the heart of building the kind of trust essential to consensus building.

- **Trust must be built around issues rather than egos and personalities.** While egos and politics are always present, the commitment to search out what is best for the institution, as was done at Middlebury, is difficult to achieve.

Reaping the Rewards

When a group trusts the intentions of its members and has a history of witnessing compromise and changing minds, and the result is creative solutions, consensus building can be an efficient and highly effective use of the group's time. In large groups, where relations are more tenuous, the work, inevitably, is more difficult and the commitments to time and patience must be greater.

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