Speedbump #6: Your Team Gets Along *Too* Well

It may sound unreal, but I have seen teams where everyone automatically agrees about everything. Typically, one person dominates such teams, to the point where it's easiest to go along with what he or she decides, just to avoid conflict. But anyone who rubberstamps team decisions is guilty of bad team membership, because this kind of action kills initiative, hurts engagement, and damages productivity.

There are three main reasons a little conflict is healthy:

1. Others May Possess Knowledge You Lack

I'd never recommend that team members go at each other's throats (so to speak), but a certain level of conflict is healthy. Saying "I don't think that's our best course of action, and here's why" is often desirable.

Even geniuses like Einstein aren't always right. Einstein fought quantum theory at first, but 100 years later it's the best-tested physical theory in existence, the basis of all modern electronics. Most ideas deserve a significant amount of discussion before they're discarded or implemented, because discussion helps determine whether the plan's worth pursuing, hammer out flaws, and add new details to the plan.

You need this input from others to figure out what you're doing wrong but don't know it. For example, on a recent flight, I order a vodka tonic. The attendant places the vodka bottle, a can of tonic, and a cup of ice on my tray and proceeds to push the cart down the aisle. But I can't open the little vodka bottle. It seems stuck. I nudge my male neighbor and ask him to please open it for me. He heroically tries. I think I see blood. He wipes the lid with his shirt and tries again. No go. We frown together, defeated. I have a bum bottle—it's soldered or something. I hit the call button. The flight attendant comes back to my row. I hold out my defective bottle, explain the problem, and request a new one. She takes the bottle, flips it upside down, and bangs it really hard five times on my seat tray. Everyone within two rows jumps in their seats. She twists the bottle open and hands it back to me, with a slight smirk and a triumphant smile. "I've been doing this a long time," she says. "The bubbles create pressure at the top. If you bang it, the bubbles pop, and the lid can be opened." I look sideways at my neighbor, and we both drop jaw on cue, agog. "Bubbles," says my neighbor, wanting me to know he is not a wimp. I nod knowingly.

Such it is with teams. Someone else always has the experience and ideas we lack. We can force it but it won't open without their help!

In a team where everyone contributes and makes a communal decision due to healthy debate, productivity—and its most important offspring, results—tend to rule, making

the team itself healthier. There's even a name for this in business circles: creative disagreement. If you don't see it in your team, consider instigating it. Put your ideas out there confidently, and maybe others will do the same.

2. Save the Day Now. Fix the Problem Later.

Imagine this scenario. There's a big project on the line, and your team missed the deadline. You're frustrated. You want to know how this happened. Who dropped the ball? Why didn't they ask for help sooner? Where did the system break down?

Well forget it—at least until the dust settles. This is not the time for second-guessing, finger-pointing, or scapegoating. Let everyone know that the problems will be addressed after the crisis has passed. The first order of business it to pull together and finish the project with a positive attitude. Once the project is safely complete, you can sit down as a team, figure out what happened, and make sure that it never happens again. This way, not only will cooler heads prevail, but the project won't suffer because of internal strife and tension.

Maintain a united front. A reasonable amount of conflict is a good thing, but remember you're all on the same team with the same goals. You all might squabble and butt heads from time to time, but you should all leave the table with a common purpose. You can argue all you want behind closed doors, but when you emerge and put on your public face, your team should own the decision and be in agreement.

3. When You Discover You're Wrong

Some people just have to be right. Your goal here is to help your team members get beyond being right. To be FAST, you need to listen to and understand what they think; encourage a plausible solution you can all implement quickly; help clarify core values, mission, and vision; set realistic goals—and to encourage others to disagree with you. Sometimes the final result shines brighter when it's shaped and challenged by others.

When I write books, the first draft is sent to a team of reviewers, who tear it up (figuratively speaking) and send their comments back to my editor, who summarizes and passes them along to me. I don't get defensive or get my feelings hurt. In fact, to the contrary, I welcome this "negative" feedback, because it makes the book stronger. Anything that anyone will share to help me create a better book that people will buy and recommend to their friends is desirable.

Consider Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, arguably the most volatile of frenemies in the computer industry of the 1980s to the 2000s. While Jobs was alive, they carried on a running competition to see whose company could top the other. We all won as a result. Between them and their competitors, we now have handheld computers and

smartphones with capacities equivalent to hundreds of ENIACs, the first room-sized electronic computers.

Don't argue just to argue, but do challenge other team members when you have legitimate differences of opinion. Admit when you're wrong and be willing to change course. They may win you over, you may win them over, or you may agree to disagree. But as long as the disagreement remains constructive, a more spirited discussion will ensue, which will achieve better results (hopefully like this book).