

Group Dynamics

The Existence of Group Bias

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The finance chairman was literally a mathematical genius, his presentation was flawless: slide after slide of impeccable statistics on why the membership should approve a \$50 per month dues increase.

The trajectory of peer club dues, expenses, membership ratios and myriad other vital facts that the membership *must* consider in making this approval splashed on the screen. Utter silence met the completion of his 45-minute presentation, followed by a smattering of courteous applause with 248 catatonic members filing into the bar. One month later the vote came back: 233 votes for and 232 votes against, the measure passed, but not by enough margin for the board to act.

Three months later the club's vice president gave a presentation with exactly the same request, only he spoke while leaning casually on the podium, and using no slides.

He talked of the great times at the club including reference to his friends and acquaintances in the audience and he used the term "we" a great deal. Resounding applause greeted the end of his presentations and one month later the measure passed by 78 percent margin.

So this is all about the natural existence of group bias, how it relates to the club environment and concepts on how to be influential from the minority position. It is incumbent on the participants to recognize this normalcy and of particular importance is this recognition by the minority trying to influence the majority. According to William D. Crano in *'The Rules of Influence'*, "minority" is defined as the individual or group that has limited (or no) power to force acceptance of their positions.

Crano is very specific in his findings that there are several key factors in a minority influencing a majority: persistence, consistency, flexibility, unanimity and objectivity. However, the most important overarching factor - critical to any hope of influence - is that the minority must be a legitimate part of the majority - there must be an "us" factor.

A significant role of the GM (minority or out-group) is to influence the directors (majority or in-group) in professionally operating the club. An astute GM will lead the board of directors with the knowledge that they are leading from the minority position.

In similar fashion, the board members need to understand that they, too, might be leading from the minority position when persuading the membership, from time to time, on issues. Clearly, the vice president recognized this important aspect bringing himself into majority status by reminding the members, often, that 'he' was one of 'them.' But, leadership should

not be abdicated because of push back from the majority - because a majority will tend towards the comfort of maintaining the status quo.

First, there must be the establishment of legitimate in-group status. For a board addressing the membership, this task is rather simple: the board should take a position as a fellow member – ‘*We’re all in this together.*’ A GM making a recommendation to the board may gain in-group status as one of this group of leaders or through gathering the prior support of a committee chair. As a fellow director with in-group status, the committee chair will allow the GM in-group status through association.

The message must be consistent, administered persistently, yet, flexible. Any confusion from the minority in the message will be met by the majority with skepticism and make it nearly impossible for the minority to be successful. Once the message has clarity and uniformity it must be administered persistently.

The message must be spoken about very often and to all who will listen (and to those who would prefer not to listen). In turn, those members will talk to other members. However, the majority rarely grants full agreement to the minorities' initial proposal - there is almost always some degree of negotiation. The minority must be flexible without giving up on the basic goal.

Hand-in-hand with consistency is unanimity. The minority must be unanimous in its proposal. A minority member who breaks with the group will derail the effort and success will be very difficult. Once the boardroom debate is complete and full discussion has allowed for a decision, the board of directors must present a united front.

Influence is more easily accomplished if the debate centers on objective facts rather than subjective opinion. It is easy to defend the fact that one formal chair being recommended costs \$450 and the other not recommended costs \$1,350, rather than defending the beauty of one chair over the other.

In the club business, leaders are constantly influencing and being influenced. Leaders will find the path much smoother if recognition is given to the natural bias of groups to discriminate to the benefit of their own group members.

Club members want engagement in the process. Get in their group, give them a specific, consistent message, be persistent in the conversations, allow them to understand your point while you try to understand theirs, and always look for opportunities to share the success by negotiation, without losing the goal. Stand in a united front on issues and frame the issues objectively. Influence is an important part of the business, success hinges on our ability to properly represent and influence our members.

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