

Welcome to the January 2002 issue of **Management Shorts**
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1. BONUS: White Paper on Getting Traction

I often describe my work as “helping clients get traction”. I realize that’s a bit abstract and have written a white paper that describes what I mean in very concrete terms:

“Getting Traction: How Management Teams Can Spend Less Time Spinning & More Time Getting Things Done”

This paper gives an overview of what causes spinning as well as listing some very practical things that managers can do, without hiring a consultant, to reduce the spin factor and help their teams be more productive.

“Getting Traction” is available in .pdf format as a free download from my web site. Go to www.acorn-od.com/news.html#paper to download now.

2. MANAGEMENT SHORT: Untangling a Complex Issue

One of the factors I talk about in “Getting Traction” is the difficulty in working through complex and abstract issues. In the paper I briefly mention a management team that had spent more than a year spinning on one issue without getting resolution. This month’s Management Short is an in depth look at this case study and how the situation was resolved.

THE PROBLEM

At almost every management team meeting an argument developed over what to do about the key competitor. The CEO wanted to buy them out, while others thought this was a waste of resources and would distract the company from the

effort to keep innovating ahead of the market. Typically a few members of the team geared up for a fight and the others sank in their seats trying to stay out of the line of fire. The arguments were the same every time and after more than a year the team had yet to make a decision. The argument ate up time and seemed to stymie progress on a number of related issues. The team had split into opposing camps and had started to tune out anything that the other side had to say, even on unrelated issues.

APPROACH

After witnessing several “rounds” of the battle I wrote up my best understanding of the two opposing views. I met with individuals to walk through the issues and make sure I fully understood what they thought and why they thought it. The “why” included all their data points – conversations with customers, past experiences, news reports they’d read, market data, analogies they’d drawn with other industries, and any other assumptions they had made in reaching their conclusion.

After the one-on-one meetings, I outlined all the issues including data points, assumptions, lines of reasoning and conclusions. I identified and broke out 3 sub-issues that had been shmushed together in previous discussions. (Yes, “shmush” is a technical term that the experts use – don’t try this at home. Some practitioners prefer “shmurple”, but I think that clouds the issue.) The sub-issues were (1) the power of a particular competitor, (2) the business model used by a number of competitors, and (3) how much value customers put on different bundles of products and features.

Once I’d fully analyzed the issues, I met for a day offsite with three of the key players. I had put each idea, data point and assumption on a separate, over-sized index card. At the offsite I mapped out all the arguments on a large “sticky wall” – a piece of parachute silk coated with artist’s mounting spray. This format allowed us to move ideas around and identify connections as our thinking developed.

At the offsite, we started by clarifying our goal: the company had a 3-year growth target that the whole team had agreed on. They had also agreed on the product direction that was most likely to achieve that target. We then looked at each of the 3 sub-issues and talked about how they might impact the larger goals. Throughout the day, whenever the discussion got off track, I returned to the shared goals and asked how the discussion was related to these goals.

We walked through one issue at a time, one index card at a time, and focused first on understanding rather than agreement. As we surfaced the assumptions, people talked more about what had led them to these conclusions – data points, assumptions, lines of reasoning. As they started to understand the different perspectives, they were able to let go of rigidly held ideas and come to

agreement on a number of points. This focused the debate on a few narrow issues that could be talked out.

We also identified competing assumptions that needed to be resolved. For example: the competitor boasts that it has over 700 customers. How much does each customer buy? What features do they value? Are they large enough to buy our more expensive product? We narrowed these questions down to a few critical ones that needed answers. The next step was some focused market research and informal discussions with partners and customers to answer these questions. Once that data was gathered, the team was able to reach agreement.

OUTCOME

The conflict was resolved. The management team was able to agree on the exact nature of the threat posed by the competitor. They identified 3 potential responses and were able to agree on the one that made the most sense and went ahead with implementation. They then turned their attention to other issues that had been ignored while they were spinning on this area of conflict.

In addition, the team now has an approach that it uses to resolve other sticky issues.

WHY THIS WORKED

Created a Setting for Open Discussion

We met on a Sunday with just a small group. Without the usual audience there was very little grand standing and people felt free to “think out loud”. It was also easier for them to open up to different points of view without losing face.

Focused Everyone on a Shared Goal

We started with a shared goal that everyone agreed on. This made them partners in solving a common problem, rather than opponents in a zero sum game. The simple structure of seating everyone in a semi-circle facing the sticky wall put them mentally on the same team with the wall being the problem to solve. Rather than beating each other with competing ideas, they worked together on a single problem.

Depersonalized the Debate

Breaking everything down into units of thought on index cards served to neutralize the discussion. We could move around, combine and revise the cards. The discussion was around the ideas not which person was right or wrong (or stupid or pig-headed). In addition, once the ideas were in writing and up on the wall, the individuals stopped making repetitive

speeches – their ideas were legitimized and preserved. They could let down the vigilance they'd had about being heard and remembered.

Increased Listening and Understanding

As I presented all the cards and arguments, everyone heard their ideas spoken out loud by a neutral party. I was careful not to promote one idea over another. Because I'd prepared with one on one interviews, I'd captured all the ideas and was able to feed them back to the group. The group listened without the usual interruptions and arguments. I encouraged questions for clarity and understanding. So we started the day with everyone having the feeling of BEING HEARD AND UNDERSTOOD. This immediately increased their willingness and ability to understand and consider opposing views. In "Seven Habits of Highly Effective People" Stephen Covey says "Seek first to understand, THEN to be understood." I find the book a bit hokey and even simplistic, but this single statement is THE secret to resolving conflict.

Broke the Debate Into Manageable Pieces

When I was in law school we called this "slicing and dicing the issues". On exams we'd be presented with a complex set of facts and be asked to identify and resolve the multiple legal issues involved. To do that we had to separate out the relevant facts for each legal issue and develop separate lines of reasoning. You failed if you shmurgled them together.

The cards helped us break things out and then group them into the relevant issues. This also helped depersonalize the discussion. As we "see" the debate mapped out, we start to understand and "own" it. When we don't understand something, we simplify and label it – usually as "John's stupid idea".

Surfaced Unspoken Assumptions

As the discussion progressed we challenged each other to get clearer and clearer on why we each believed something to be true. This surfaced assumptions that had not been articulated before. Once they were made explicit we could share multiple data points that both supported and contradicted these assumptions. Unspoken assumptions can't be resolved – the first and most important step is making them explicit. We also set a norm that no assumption was stupid, but also that no assumption was sacred – everything was open for debate.

Explored Multiple Options

The discussion loosened up rigidly held ideas. This paved the way for considering multiple options. Research has shown that the quality of decision making rises dramatically when teams consider more than just 2 options. Multiple alternatives leads to a richer and more creative discussion.

Untangling complex issues is hard work, both intellectually and in terms of team dynamics. The approach described here is one way to create a space for doing this difficult work.

3. FOR THOSE WHO WANT MORE: Resources on Conflict

One of the classic books on conflict is “Getting to Yes” by Roger Fisher and William Ury. It sets out some of the basic groundrules that I find very helpful whenever I do conflict resolution. It is available from Amazon through the link below.

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0140157352/acornconsulti-20>

The technique of breaking down beliefs into underlying data points, assumptions and reasoning, is captured in a concept called The Ladder of Inference. A good description of this concept is found in “The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook” by Peter Senge, et. al. It is available from Amazon through the link below.

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0385472560/acornconsulti-20>

One of my favorite articles from Harvard Business Review is “How Management Teams Can Have a Good Fight” by Kathleen M. Eisenhardt, et. al. You can download a .pdf version of this article through the Harvard Web Site at the link below.

http://www.hbsp.harvard.edu/hbsp/prod_detail.asp?97402

4. GETTING STARTED: Untangling a Current Issue

Identify an important issue that your team seems to be stuck on. Ask individuals to pick an opposing view and describe it as fully as possible so that the person holding that view feels fully understood. Keep going until all the views have been fully articulated TO THE SATISFACTION OF THE PERSON HOLDING EACH VIEW. If even one person doesn't feel fully understood, you need a more in-depth process to surface and validate all the assumptions.

Please forward this newsletter to colleagues and friends who are tired of spinning and would like to get traction on a sticky issue.

As always I welcome your feedback on this newsletter.

Warm regards,
Andrea

About Management Shorts

Management Shorts is a free newsletter for senior managers on leadership, management and teamwork – the key leverage points for improving the speed and quality of decision-making and execution.

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