Building Consensus
The Art of Getting to YES

By Michael Wilkinson, CMF
Managing Director, Leadership Strategies, Inc.
Author, *The Secrets of Facilitation* and *The Secrets to Masterful Meetings*

Facilitators and consultants are often charged with helping groups work together to create solutions that address issues, meet objectives, resolve problems, etc. One of the skills that is important to bring to the table is the ability to build consensus - even when the starting point appears to be <u>significant</u> disagreement. In our work at *Leadership Strategies*, we have found it helpful to think about disagreements in three levels. In addition, we employ five core consensus building strategies, depending upon the level of the disagreement.

Why do people disagree?

Our work with hundreds of groups over the past five years has led us to categorize disagreements into three basic categories. That is, people tend to disagree for one of three reasons generally; and more often than not, due to the first reason below:

1. They have not clearly heard and understood the other's alternative and reasons for supporting the alternative **(Level 1: They are not hearing each other)**

2. They have heard and understood, but they have had different experiences or hold different values that result in preferring one alternative to the other **(Level 2: They have different values or experiences)**

3. The disagreement is based on personality, past history with one another, or other factors that have nothing to do with the alternatives **(Level 3: Outside factors)**

The facilitator has techniques to address the first two reasons. However, a disagreement based on personality or past history (Level 3) can not be resolved in the session. Therefore it is important that you determine the source of the disagreement as quickly as possible to avoid wasting time.

Addressing A Level 3 Disagreement

How do you recognize a Level 3 disagreement? If the argument has no logic as its base or the parties arguing show no interest in resolving the argument, then the problem is probably personality or past history. If this is so, consider the following course of action:

- **Take a break.** Meet with the parties privately to indicate to them you do not believe the issue can be solved in the session.

- Seek agreement to **go to a higher source together** for resolution outside the session. In essence, let a higher level in the organization make the decision by having both parties go to the source together to explain the issue.

- **Don't attempt to resolve the issue in the session!** Typically issues based on personality or past history take more time than you can afford to give.

If the source of the disagreement is based on Level 1 or Level 2, we recommend applying the appropriate consensus building techniques. In our four-day course, *The Effective Facilitator*, we teach five techniques for building consensus:

- Delineating Alternatives
- Discussing Strengths and Weaknesses
- Merging Alternatives
- Building Criteria Lists and Scoring Alternatives
- Converging Upon an Alternative

For the rest of this article, we will focus on the first three methods for building consensus.

Delineating Alternatives

As indicated before, the primary reason people disagree is that they have not clearly heard the other's alternative and reasons for supporting it. Often times we can provide a great service just by finding a way to quiet the first side and have them listen to the second side and then quiet the second side and have them listen to the first side. Just by listening to one another, the people disagreeing often find they are not disagreeing at all! At *Leadership Strategies* we believe achieving this end is what "**Delineating the Alternatives**" is all about.

1. Start with agreement: "We seem to all agree that…"

2. Confirm the source of the disagreement: "Where we seem to disagree is…is that right?"

3. Write the issue under discussion and the alternatives on a single flip chart. (You may chose to write them as you understand them, or alternatively, have the participants tell you what to write.)

> **Example**
>
> Issue:　　　Will salespeople be open to using a lap-top computer?
>
> Alternative 1:　Survey them to find out
>
> Alternative 2:　Do a small pilot

4. For each alternative, direct specific questions at the supporter of the alternative; record responses on the flip chart. The questions should result in the group understand the following:

   - How much

   - How long

   - What and Who is involved?

5. Once each alternative is delineated, check to determine if consensus has been reached. You can do this simply by focusing on the disagreers. If either appears to have begun transferring allegiance to the other alternative, ask in a non-threatening way if consensus has been reached.

Even if consensus has not been reached, delineating alternatives first will allow the discussion to continue based on a common understanding of the critical issues. You as the facilitator can then use one of the other consensus building techniques (e.g., Strength and Weaknesses, Merging, Weighted Score, Converging) to facilitate the group to consensus.

Identifying Strengths and Weaknesses

If consensus is not reached through delineation, we recommend moving to identifying the **strengths and weaknesses** of each alternative.

1. Have the **entire group** focus on one alternative and give out the strengths of that alternative, then the strengths of the second alternative.

2. Once the strengths of each alternative has been identified, have the entire group discuss the weaknesses of each alternative. It's very important to get the strengths of both alternatives FIRST, before discussing either's weaknesses.

   - This method gives "value" to each alternative before the participants have an opportunity to "devalue" either through the weaknesses discussion.

   - For many disagreements, the weaknesses are equivalent to the strengths of the competing alternative. Once the group identifies this relationship, you can save time discussing the weaknesses.

3. An alternative method is to have each of the disagreers give the strengths of the alternative he/she opposes. The supporter of the alternative then, and the weaknesses of the one he/she supports. (This approach encourages active listening and helps the disagreers see the other side.)

4. **Do not** assign a supporter of an alternative to give its strengths. This method can serve to further polarize the group.

5. Once strengths and weaknesses have been identified for each alternative, check to determine if consensus has been reached.

Recall that a Level 2 disagreement is based on different experiences or values. We believe through the strengths and weaknesses process, you are assisting the group in identifying the underlying values that result in the participants supporting one alternative over another. Even if consensus has not been reached, identifying these underlying values will provide the group with a clear basis for moving forward. You as the facilitator can then use one of the other consensus building techniques (e.g., Merging, Weighted Score, Converging) to facilitate the group to consensus.

Merging

If the group does not reach consensus through strengths and weaknesses, the next technique we recommend is to create a third alternative which combines the key strengths of the prior alternatives. At *Leadership Strategies*, we call this process "**Merging**."

1. Direct the group to the charts identifying the strengths of each alternative.

2. Ask, "For this first alternative, what are the one or two most important strengths?" (Place an asterisk next to the one or two identified.)

3. Identified the one or two key strengths for the other alternative.

4. If possible, draw a single circle that encompasses the key strengths identified from the alternatives. Ask, "Is there a way to create a new alternative that combines these strengths? Is there an alternative that is … (read the strengths)? What would it have to look like?"

5. Once one or more new alternatives is identified, have the group select one which has the most promise and delineate it (See the prior tip on Delineation.)

Merging is often the key approach to creating alternatives that work for the entire group. Typically, we use the Delineate-Strengths/Weaknesses-Merge process in sequence. You may find that the group is ready to short-cut the process early and create new alternatives right a way!

Techniques such as these can provide additional tools to help you move a group forward. As always, be careful to understand the needs of the groups and the nature of the disagreement so as to apply the appropriate consensus building strategy.

Interested in learning more facilitation techniques? Check out our course, The Effective Facilitator.

Michael Wilkinson is the Managing Director of Leadership Strategies – The Facilitation Company, and a much sought after trainer, facilitator and speaker. He is a Certified Master Facilitator and a Certified Professional Facilitator. As a past president of the Southeast Association of Facilitators and a board member of the National Institute of Facilitation, Michael is a national leader in the facilitation industry. You can get more tips from either of Michael's books, *The Secrets of Facilitation* or *The Secrets to Masterful Meetings*. You can receive a signed copy through our website.