



But I thought the board wanted this ...

Robert C. Harris

Wednesday, August 27, 2014

0
COMMENTS

Share this article

High-spirited and eager-to-contribute board members often voice their ideas with enthusiasm and good intentions. With discussion, the enthusiasm for the idea increases. The conversation gains support as more people join in, giving the perception that the proposal is popular and worthy of support.



But wait. Is there really backing for the idea, or is it just another conversation or a distraction from the agenda? This may describe the concept of "group think."

What starts with, "I have a good idea ..." may be worthy, but does it fit within the strategic plan and culture of the organization? Directors must be disciplined enough to recognize the difference.

Group think

How can the board determine what is a wise motion versus what is just a fervent discussion?

Encourage the meeting chair to ask, "We know this is an interesting discussion, but how many of you are certain that the idea fits inside our strategic plan and is worthy of allocating more time to this?"

When enthusiasm outpaces knowledge-based discussion, it reminds me of a dangerous decision-making principle. Group think is a psychological phenomenon that occurs within a group in which the desire for harmony and conformity results in an irrational or dysfunctional decision.

The principle is frequently used to describe the Space Shuttle Challenger disaster. The NASA team was so enthusiastic to launch the shuttle they may have failed to recognize the impact of the weather on the rocket booster's O-rings.

In the setting of a board meeting, directors may try to minimize conflict and prefer to reach an agreement. They do it without considering facts, culture or alternatives. The eagerness of the board diminishes the importance of the strategic plan, the budget and the governing documents. Ideally, an astute board member would ask, "Is this a discussion important enough to continue, or should we 'park it' and get back to our agenda?"

Abilene paradox

Another example of a group being swayed by the momentum of the conversation is evidenced in the Abilene paradox. The concept describes a group of people who collectively make a decision when in reality, nobody really agreed. The group seeks harmony and does not question the merit of the discussion.

The paradox comes from an anecdote in which a family in Texas, on a hot afternoon, agrees to drive 53 miles to Abilene for a meal. Everyone voices that it is a "great idea." The 53 long miles are hot and dusty. The meal is not much better than the drive.

After the exhausted family returns home, the mom voiced that she would have preferred to have stayed home. Others said they wished they had avoided the trek but felt they had to agree in order to satisfy the rest of the group.

Moral of the story

There will be times at the meeting when the enthusiasm of the discussion (group think) or a desire to agree with the others (Abilene paradox) replaces the good judgment of the board.

Everyone should be empowered to ask: "Is this a discussion we need to have? Does it advance our mission? Does it fit within our strategic goals?" If the answers are "no," postpone the conversation for future consideration and get back to strategic governance.

Share this article

About the Author



Bob Harris, CAE, provides free governance tools and templates at [The NonProfit Center](#). He is on the faculty for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and has worked in Amman, Jordan, Tokyo, Japan, Kiev, Ukraine and Minsk, Belarus to help organizations. Bob received "Association Partner of the Year" award from Association Trends Magazine in 2012, and he has authored books on association management. To improve management he created the Association Self-Auditing Process, used by more than 20,000 organizations. He believes that nonprofit organizations should be as efficient as any commercial business.



Add a comment...

☒ Also post on Facebook

Posting as Bob Harris ([Not you?](#))

Comment

Facebook social plugin



Related Industries

Association Management

Related Articles

[Step aside, millennials — Here comes Generation Z](#)

[What it takes to be the boss](#)

[The 10 commandments of hiring and employee retention](#)

[Is your mobile workforce exposing you to unseen risks?](#)

[How to stand out in your next meeting](#)

[4 steps to effective performance management](#)

[10 tips to improve exhibitor retention at your trade show](#)

[NLRB: You can't require employees to be positive or professional](#)

Recent Articles

[Are you the cleanup crew? Discovering the patient accounts are a mess](#)

[US falls behind on innovation in education](#)

[Smart factories know how to use big data](#)

[Veteran healthcare: Meeting the moral obligation with locum tenens](#)

[3 powerful new ways your business can use social media](#)



RAISE YOUR **PROFILE**

See your work in future editions

YOUR CONTENT, YOUR EXPERTISE,
YOUR NAME

Your Industry Needs YOUR Expert Voice
&
We've got the platform you need

[Find Out How](#)

MULTIBRIEFS

Copyright © 2014 by MultiView, Inc. All the text, graphics, audio, design, software, and other works are the copyrighted works of MultiView, Inc. All Rights Reserved. Any redistribution or reproduction of any materials herein is strictly prohibited.

