

Investor's Business Daily

FOR PEOPLE WHO CHOOSE TO SUCCEED

Paid Circulation 264,000

Published Nationally At Ten Points
By Investor's Business Daily Inc.

Thursday, October 21, 1999

Los Angeles, California
Volume 16, No. 137 ©1999

www.investors.com

\$1.00

NEWS FOR YOU

Five Quick, Easy Steps To Gain Consensus *How To Get The Team's Input Without Giving Up Control*

By Morey Stettner
Investor's Business Daily

When Donald Malinovsky sits down with his employees to hash out a tough decision, he watches the clock.

"I limit these meetings to one hour," said Malinovsky, general manager at Daniels Manufacturing in Orlando, Fla. "If we don't come to a consensus in one hour, we meet again the next day after we can all rethink it."

But when you operate by committee, be warned: Unchecked consensus-building can deplete your energy and polarize — not strengthen — your team. Worse still, good ideas can get watered down by too many differing opinions.

To avoid the pitfalls of all talk and no walk, try following these five key secrets of effective consensus building.

■ **Lay the groundwork.** Rather than declaring your goal and trying to ram it down everyone's throats, first pry open their minds to accept your proposal.

How? Meet with key players privately beforehand. Ask for their input before you seek the entire team's buy-in.

"I reach consensus in two steps," said Paul Snyder, chairman of Snyder, a hospitality company in Buffalo, N.Y. "First, I meet separately with members of my management team. I'll present my idea and ask each one, 'What are your thoughts?' Then I hold a group meeting and include many of their best ideas in

“
Make it clear to the group that you want their input, but don't tell them that any final decision will be made with total consensus.

— Lesley Mallow Wendell,
executive director of Options Inc.

”
the plan that I present to them. That makes them more open to it.”

■ **Defer to the expert.** “I find the person who knows the most about what they're doing and let them gain consensus,” said Jerry Shaff, president of Custom Products Corp., a manufacturer of industrial tools in North Haven, Conn. “If there's disagreement within the group, I let this person resolve it. Consensus isn't everyone agreeing which way to go as much as getting everyone to acknowledge and accept the expert's views.”

■ **Define your role.** Some employees may foolishly assume they possess veto power over a team's stab at consensus. You may not want to grant so much authority to them.

“Make it clear to the group that you want their input, but don't tell them that any final decision will be made with total consensus,” said Lesley Mallow Wendell, executive director of Options

Inc., a career and human resources consulting firm in Philadelphia. “You might say, ‘I'd like your input before this decision gets made.’ That indicates you're not going to hold up everything until every single person fully agrees.”

■ **Stick to the schedule.** Announce a date within which all employees must chime in with their opinion. For example, say, “We need to reach a decision on this by Nov. 15, so I need your input no later than Nov. 7.” Then reject any comments after Nov. 7. “People often ignore deadlines, including the manager, so then everyone's input trickles in later,” said Mallow Wendell. “That slows attempts at a consensus. It's better to keep to the original deadline that you set.”

■ **Limit the participants.** When making big decisions, you may find that everyone wants to make their voices heard. But reaching consensus can become impossible when dozens of employees bring conflicting views to the table. It's smarter to limit the discussion to a handful of pre-selected individuals.

“I have to gain consensus when we look at a piece of property,” said Howard Berrey, group vice president of real estate and construction at Bob Evans Farms, a restaurant chain based in Columbus, Ohio.

“A lot of companies take these decisions to a committee that includes people who've never seen the property,” Berrey said. “But if they've never been there, how can they know about it? I like to involve just three people who've seen the property, and all three of us must agree before we go ahead.”