

Building consensus

HOW TO GET EVERYONE TO WORK TOGETHER AS A TEAM

BY CAROLYN LAWELL

For Albert M. Green, moving employees toward a common goal is in the art of being a consensus builder.

"You want to get as many people as you can on board with the direction you want to go," says Green, CEO of the 60-employee Kent Displays Inc., which develops and manufactures Reflex liquid crystal display products.

The keys to building consensus among your employees are leaving your ego at the door, realizing that others might have better ideas than you do and involving employees early in the decision process, Green says.

Smart Business spoke with Green about how to become a consensus builder.

Q. What do you need to keep in mind when trying to build a consensus?

Put your ego aside is the first thing. You have to have enough confidence to realize that other people have as good or better ideas than you do. Those are the two things.

You've got to be very confident in yourself. There's a fine line between confidence, arrogance and cockiness, but you have to be confident in that you are not easily threatened. That is what allows you to build consensus because you're not threatened by other people who have better ideas than you have.

You don't have to go in with, 'I'm the smartest guy in the room, and I know everything and all this kind of nonsense.' You have confidence in your ability, and what you do is you seek others and other people's opinions and you mold those together. But you don't have to get all insecure about the

fact that your idea might not be the best one.

You have to be open to ideas. You have enough confidence that if somebody else is right and you're wrong that you're OK with that. So you're self-confident, as opposed to being bullheaded.

Q. How do you promote consensus building among employees?

Getting people involved early and often. I talk to people rather than e-mail them. It's a standard thing about getting people on board with communicating to people.

It's not just telling them what you want. You listen to what they're saying. You mold a bunch of opinions into a single, coherent approach moving forward, and you have a lot of buy-in because a lot of people contribute to it.

Q. What are the keys to getting people involved early and often?

You need to have people take ownership of things. It's hard to have people take ownership of the things when you bring them in at the last minute.

If you bring people in in the last minute, they're doing what you tell them to do as opposed to taking ownership of it and making it something that they see as theirs. Then, they drive it through because they're interested in it, not because you tell them to be interested in it.

The person has to be self-motivated. That's one of the three pillars. I would say, self-

motivated, they have to have a really good work ethic, and they have to have strength of character. Those are the three things that I look for.

You get those kinds of people, surround yourself with those kind of people, then a lot of this stuff takes care of itself.

Q. How do you mold several opinions into one decision?

It kind of happens naturally when people are involved

in the process. They tend to have an input, and they steer it. When I get into a critical decision, a lot of times I don't know what the right answer is, so we as a group can talk about it and argue about it.

It's a dialogue. There's a lot of dialogue. I'm the final decision-maker, but there's dialogue.

People don't always agree. You build the right management team where there's trust among the players. All the people on the management team have to leave their egos at the door. They have to be willing to dialogue and debate issues, and that's about building consensus.

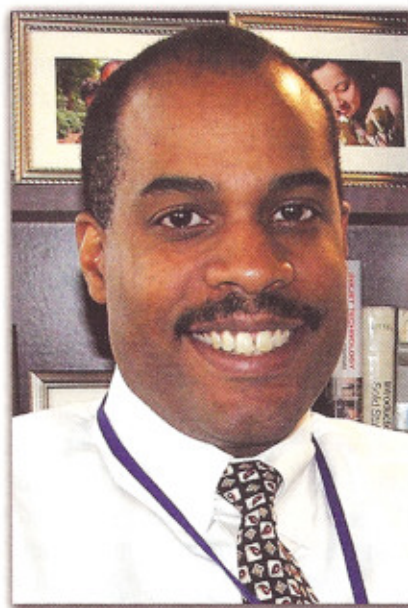
If you have smart people that are rational and can think through things, you generally come to an agreement based on the set of ideas that come to the table.

Q. How do you, as the leader, maintain a voice during this process?

The thing that you have to be careful about is that I want to emphasize consensus, but there is one CEO. You still have to take responsibility for the actions of your company; that's why you have to be the final decision-maker. You're accountable for the company.

Accountability is distributed throughout the company on different levels. But there's still one CEO, and that has to be clearly communicated and people have to understand that.

What (employees) want is that they know that they have an impact and what they say really matters. And it really does fundamentally. <<



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