

LESSONS LEARNED FROM

THE DEBRIEF

BY JON BECKER



DOES YOUR TEAM TAKE ADVANTAGE OF CONSTRUCTIVE DISAGREEMENT?

The Korean Air Flight 801 disaster is a stark reminder of the critical need for constructive disagreement in organizations. On Aug. 6, 1997, Korean Air Flight 801 approached Guam's airport in poor weather. The captain was tired and making errors. The first officer could see they were in trouble. He knew they were descending too fast and that the captain's approach was wrong. He knew disaster was approaching. Yet, at that time, Korean culture had extremely high levels of power distance, meaning subordinates did not question superiors.

The first officer made some mild suggestions and hinted at problems, but he never directly challenged the captain's decisions. The plane crashed into the hillside three miles short of the runway, killing 229 people. Although the captain's errors were the direct cause of the accident, if the first officer had spoken plainly, the disaster might have been prevented.

Research into this and similar crashes has identified a clear pattern: The cultures that produced the deadliest cockpits were cultures where subordinates could not challenge authority, where hierarchy mattered more than the truth.

The application of this to tactical leaders is clear. If you create a hierarchy that prevents the truth from reaching decision-makers, you are setting yourself up for disaster. Your organization has people who can see when you are making

mistakes, becoming complacent, or overlooking critical information. The question is whether they feel safe telling you and challenging your thinking.

Why do you need people who will disagree?

It would be easy to believe that the tactical community is full of cultures where people always speak up. Surely, when lives are on the line, people will overcome social pressure and say what needs to be said. Yet the Korean Air crash and other tragic incidents prove otherwise. The first officer knew the plane was about to hit a mountain. He still could not bring himself to directly challenge his captain.

Danger is not enough to overcome social pressures, especially in rank-based structured organizations full of alpha personalities. The environment must be deliberately constructed to allow dissent. In fact, it must encourage it openly.

You know the story of the emperor's new clothes. The emperor parades through the streets in his magnificent new "garments" the weavers have made him. Everyone can see that he is naked, but nobody says anything. The weavers have convinced everyone that only fools cannot see the fabric, so the courtiers praise the garments, the citizens applaud, and the emperor walks on, exposed and oblivious, until a child finally states the obvious.



Most organizations have emperors, and most of those emperors do not know they are naked. We know that complacency and groupthink are always a danger to the tactical community. So, the question teams must constantly ask themselves is: Have we created an environment where people feel comfortable challenging our ideas?

The most valuable person in your organization is often the one willing to tell you that you are wrong, unlike sycophants or politicians who prioritize self-preservation. The strong people who will risk making you angry because they care more about the mission than about your comfort. These people care deeply about what they do and often speak truth to power if given the right environment. When you

have people willing to push back, you tap the full knowledge of your organization rather than hearing only from the usual suspects.

Why do we shut down disagreement?

Strong people often have sharp edges. They are constantly looking for a better way and are frequently frustrated by others. This can make them a real handful for leaders.

Sadly, many leaders interpret these people as "difficult personalities" and become frustrated. They find such individuals hard to control, argumentative and sometimes disrespectful. In many organizations, this leads to truth-tellers being marginalized, disciplined or forced out. Passion is

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quashed in favor of obedience. Conformity is encouraged with an eye toward producing a homogeneous team where everyone plays nice and does what they are told.

As a society, we have moved away from the time when someone who was underperforming would have a supervisor take them aside and say directly, “You are struggling, and you need to improve.” We avoid such conversations now because people get their feelings hurt, because they do not feel safe when confronted and because direct feedback makes them uncomfortable.

This drift toward comfort has unintentionally created environments where we are no longer challenging each other’s thinking. We avoid conflict and often mistake politeness for kindness. We confuse harmony with being a healthy team. And in the process, we are moving toward the Korean Airlines cockpit mindset where hierarchy matters more than the right answer and social comfort takes precedence over safety.

This is like throwing away all the sharp knives in your kitchen to avoid injuring yourself. Sure, you certainly will be safer, but you also will end up with a drawer full of spoons. If all you want the organization to do is metaphorically “eat soup,” then spoons are fine. If you want a meat-eating team that achieves at a high level, you need knives, which means creating an environment where knives are welcome.

Ground rules for constructive disagreement

To accomplish this, organizations need to establish social ground rules that make constructive disagreement not just possible but expected. The best way to accomplish this is to explicitly adopt four social rules:

1. Harvest group wisdom. The goal of the team should always be to harvest the wisdom of the entire group. Elite teams build systems to harvest perspectives from everyone, not just the senior people, not just the subject-matter experts, and not just the voices that usually get heard. Different people bring different orientations shaped by their unique experiences and mental models. The wisdom is not in any individual, it is in the collective knowledge of the entire team.

2. The right answer wins. The team mindset has to be that getting the right answer is far more important than anyone’s ego. There has to be a universal understanding that no idea is born perfect and that by attacking it and exposing its weaknesses, we will always make it better. Planning is

iteration, and criticism is support. It does not matter who brings the insight; what matters is improving the outcome. The goal is not for any individual to be right, but for the team to collectively find the best solution.

3. Candor without cruelty. Direct candid feedback usually appears harsh. But the organization’s knives are only sharpened by friction. The blade and the stone have what appears to be a harsh relationship, but the blade is only made sharper by the friction of the stone. The key factor is that candor must be rooted in care and a genuine desire to improve the person or the plan. Communication should be direct and, at times, even brutally honest, but it is never cruel or bullying.

4. Thank you for disagreeing. Disagreement does not happen automatically. You must create explicit permission for it. Make disagreement a cultural practice, not an exception. Every member of the team must model the right behavior. When your plan gets attacked, everyone watches. If your response is defensive, disagreement dies. If your response is genuine, consideration, flexibility and gratitude, disagreement will thrive.

Tools for constructive disagreement

Once the social ground rules have been established, there are four tools used by elite units and high-performing corporate teams that can be utilized to ensure that your team is always using constructive disagreement to sharpen the collective knife.

Tool 1: Get to ground truth. As you move up in an organization, people naturally want to please you. They bring you the wins, but they also want to hide the missed deadlines, the toxic teammates and the failing projects. They tell themselves they are “managing” the situation or “protecting” your time, but they are starving the operating system of the data it needs to survive. If you only sit in your office, you will eventually lose orientation over what is happening at ground level and get hit by something you never saw coming.

To harvest the wisdom of your team, leave the office and go hunt for bad news yourself. The military calls this concept “ground truth”: Find out what is happening on the ground where the battle is taking place. Every layer of hierarchy between you and the ground adds filtering. The only way to get unfiltered information is to go where the work happens.

Tool 2: Rank-off planning. During planning sessions, a very effective approach is to “remove” rank and have all team members treated as equals regardless of position or seniority. Everyone has a voice at the table. No one is too junior to challenge ideas, nor is anyone seen as so important that their opinion carries undue weight. The goal is to create a candid, open discussion where ideas are challenged based on their merit, not based on who originally proposed them.

One effective way to implement this is to have members speak in reverse seniority order at planning sessions (i.e., junior members speak first). This allows everyone to speak

before the most senior members do, which prevents them from skewing the discussion. After all, it is much easier to state that you like a certain approach before the boss says he likes a different one.

Rank-off planning recognizes the fallibility of leadership, which has an exceptional effect on group culture. Leaders who run rank-off planning sessions implicitly say, “I care more about getting this right than I do about my ego.”

Of course, once a plan has been finalized, rank goes back on and the team returns to normal operations to implement the plan. This egalitarian approach is for planning purposes only; execution requires clear lines of authority.

Tool 3: Red teaming. Plans are always made in a vacuum, and even if done collaboratively, they have a way of coming undone when they contact the real world. One way to prepare for this is by red teaming your own plans, especially for very large-scale operations.

A group of neutral, objective people who were not part of the planning are brought in to serve as an opposing force. Their objective is to defeat your team and expose the weaknesses of your plans. This can take the form of physically defeating them in force-on-force training or academically defeating them in a tabletop exercise. In either case, the goal is the same: expose weaknesses before an actual operation through the adversarial process.

Marc Polymeropoulos, a former senior CIA operations officer, describes how his team always had someone assigned to act as an in-house red team, which he calls the “process monkey.” The process monkey asks: Have we checked all our boxes? Have we considered all the angles? What are we missing? Who has not been heard from? What assumptions might be wrong? Their job is to murder bad ideas before those ideas murder the mission. Ironically, in most organizations, this person is seen as an obstacle. In elite organizations, they are recognized as essential.

Tool 4: Premortems. If red teaming brings in outsiders to attack your plan, premortems turn the planning team into their own critics. Gary Klein, the father of modern decision science, developed this technique to extract lessons before failure occurs.

Here is how it works: After a decision has been made but before it is executed, you regather the team and ask them to imagine that the plan has failed spectacularly. Not that it might fail. That it has already failed. They then try to figure out why that happened.

Klein explains that when you ask people to critique a plan, they often encounter social pressure not to appear negative or disloyal. The premortem reverses this dynamic by starting with the assumption that the plan failed and giving permission to identify weaknesses.

In practice, tell the team: “Imagine it is six months from now. This project has failed completely. We are sitting here

trying to figure out what went wrong. Take three minutes and write down all the reasons you can think of for why it failed.” Then go around the table, with each person sharing one reason. Keep cycling until you exhaust the list. What emerges may surprise you; concerns that people have harbored privately suddenly appear in the open. Research suggests premortems surface about 30 percent more potential failure causes than standard planning discussions.

Conclusion

High-performing teams don’t eliminate friction; they harness it by fostering open dialogue and encouraging diverse perspectives. They create environments where the members of the team can challenge the plan. Where disagreement is welcomed rather than suppressed.

The question is not whether your people can see your mistakes. The question is whether you have created conditions where they feel safe telling you. If your meetings are quiet, if no one pushes back on ideas, if your best people are “easy to manage,” the odds are you have created an environment for compliance, not excellence.

One word of caution: Not everything that cuts is a knife. Passionate people who challenge ideas to make the organization better are knives — sharp, capable and occasionally uncomfortable — but they accomplish the work that needs to be done. High-performing jerks who tear others down to make themselves feel powerful are not knives. They are broken glass. They cut indiscriminately, including cutting the team and the organization. Embrace your knives. Remove your broken glass.

Don’t be the emperor. And don’t be the organization that produces subordinates who cannot speak; create an environment of constructive disagreement.

About the author

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