



MONSTERS IN MEETINGS - PART 6, DEADLOCKED DISCUSSIONS

This one creeps up on you.

And if you let it continue, it will ruin your meeting.

At first it seems that the participants are working toward an agreement. They raise concerns. Then they explore the concerns. It all seems normal.

But it keeps going.

In fact, it expands. And soon you have an argument where neither side will let go. Your meeting is now stuck in a deadlock.

So how do you fix it?

Approach 1: Form a subcommittee

Ask for volunteers from the opposing viewpoints to form a subcommittee to resolve the issue. This is a useful approach, because: 1) The issue may require extensive research, which is best completed outside the meeting, 2) The people who caused the deadlock will be responsible for solving it, or 3) The effort to resolve the issue will test its priority. That is, if no one wants to spend time finding a solution, then perhaps the issue (or at least the controversy) is unimportant.

Ask for a subcommittee by saying:

"There seem to be concerns about this issue. Rather than use everyone's time in the meeting, I want a subcommittee to resolve this and report back to us. Who wants to be on it?"

Of course, if no one volunteers, that ends the deadlock. Then you say, "It seems that we lack support for this issue. In that case I want to return to our agenda. The next item is"

What else can you do?

Approach 2: Ask for an analysis

If a minority obstructs resolution, ask them to analyze the issue and propose alternatives. You can say:

"Some of you seem to view this issue differently. Could you help us understand your position by preparing an analysis of the issue with workable alternatives?"

As with a subcommittee, this approach will either uncover essential considerations or test commitment. In either case, it moves the deadlock out of the meeting so that you can proceed.

Notice that each of these approaches begins by acknowledging the truth, which is, a deadlock exists. Then it puts people to work on resolving the deadlock.

There's one more point.

Leaders work in a world of gray. In this case you have to allow some disorder and disagreement during the meeting as part of achieving a result. And you have to monitor the level of disorder because if it goes on for too long, you will have to intervene.

It's like recognizing that your car is about to run out of gas. This means it's time to buy more, rather than sitting there, holding the wheel, pretending that everything will be okay.

Use these techniques to put your meeting back on track.

This is the sixth of a seven part article on Monsters in Meetings.