

Foster Dissent, Quiet Consensus



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I've been a fan of dissent-over comfortable consensus-for some time. While finishing Adam Grant's book, *Originals*, I discovered some new insights into why and how consensus and groupthink pair up to kill innovation. Grant describes how Polaroid made strides in electronic imaging in the early 1980s, and finished its digital camera prototype by 1992. What led the company to wait (disastrously) to release its first digital camera until 1996? As Grant explains, the consensus view at Polaroid was that customers would 'always want hard copies of pictures.' No one questioned this view, and instead of being among the first to offer a digital camera, Polaroid waited and watched as other companies released digital cameras to eager buyers. Grant writes that "Groupthink is the enemy of originality; people feel pressured to conform to the dominant, default view instead of championing diversity."

During a recent workshop I taught a class of aspiring risk champions a simple technique to surface views and options that go against the grain. When a proposed solution to a troubling risk was offered, I invited the group to identify the opposite-or antithesis-of that solution. After pondering a few contrary options and possibilities, teams then brainstormed 'synthesis' options and solutions. These 'synthesis' solutions combined elements from both the original solution and an antithesis solution. The result was an array of strategies worth considering, starting with the 'thesis,' continuing with the 'antithesis,' and wrapping up with the 'synthesis.' This technique, sometimes referred to as T-A-S (thesis-antithesis-synthesis), helps break the stranglehold of consensus thinking. And by identifying the polar opposite-the antithesis of the first idea put forth-you wind up with myriad options and approaches for tackling difficult challenges in unique and inspiring ways.

What NOT To Do

The only 'must' rule when it comes to dissent-offering a contrarian view or delivering negative feedback-is to banish the practice of giving negative feedback to the wrong recipient behind closed doors. Upset with a co-worker? Talk to that co-worker. Disagree with a new idea announced by the boss? Offer an alternative or two in the presence of your boss and others.

In his chapter titled "Rethinking Groupthink," Grant channels Jack Handey, host of the "Deep Thoughts" segment on *Saturday Night Live*. In a [1991 episode of SNL](#), Handey advises to "Walk a mile in someone's shoes before criticizing them. That way, when you criticize them, you're a mile away and you have their shoes." At least figuratively, Handey's lighthearted advice inspires a compassionate approach for delivering critical

feedback and stirring productive dissent.

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