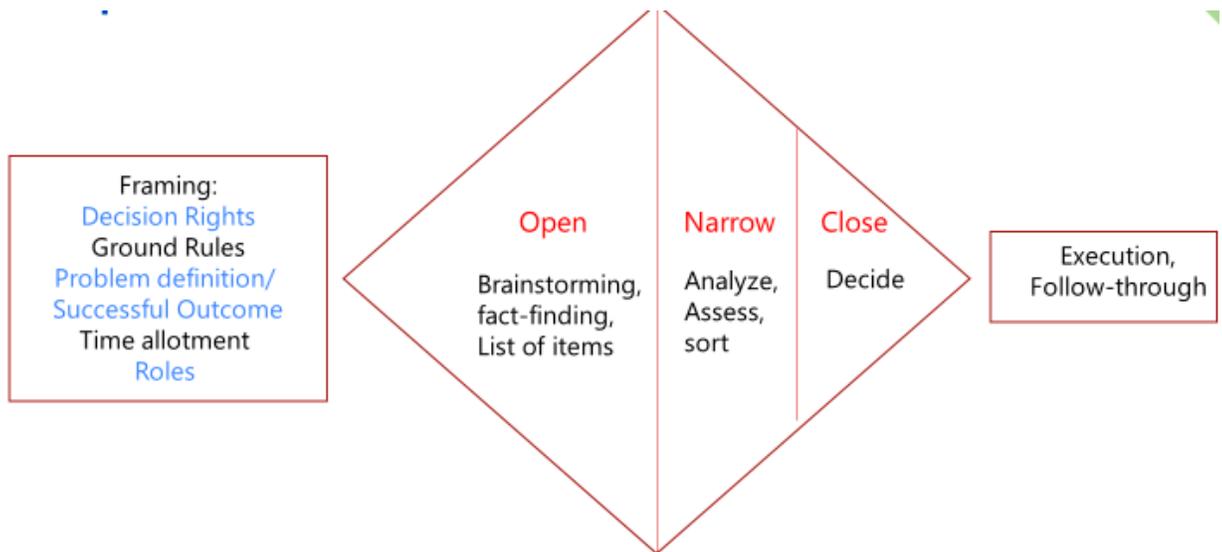


April 2, 2018

LOL: Open and Productive Debate

Open and productive debates win out. They allow teams to make the best decisions. And good decisions characterize the best firms. Most firms don't do this well. So, read on and learn how to do better.

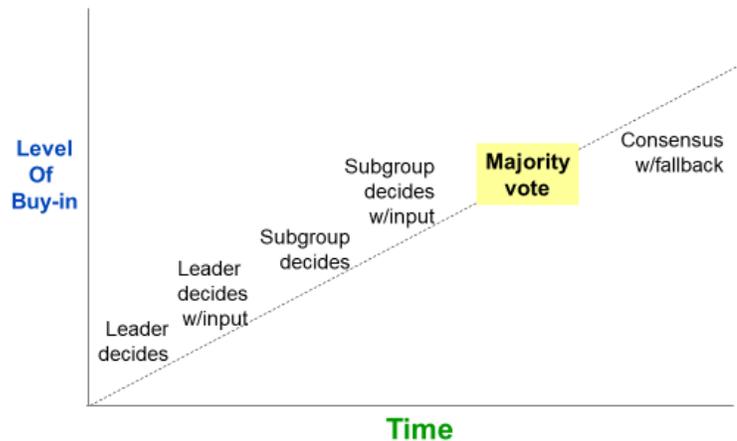
Framing the discussion is crucial. In other words, before jumping into the topic—no matter how juicy—get the playing field marked off and the rules clearly defined. The model below has been tried and tested over decades. It works. The elements will be explained in this piece:



Taking the elements in order:

- 1. Decision Rights:** Before you even start a discussion decide HOW the decision will be made. Establish who has the final authority over decisions? That person then has the rights to decide how a decision will be made from the diagram below. The flow of the chart is from command-and-control (deciding alone and telling them) to consensus (everyone favors the decision).

Decision Rights



For example, the person with decision rights might say, “we’ll discuss/debate this idea for 30 minutes, then after getting that input, I’ll make the decision.” Or s/he could say, “we’ll discuss for 30 minutes, then vote.” The point is to make it very clear how the decision will be reached. This helps people address their arguments towards the neutral decision maker and not “at” the other debater. Similarly, in a court room, the lawyers address the jury or the judge but not the other lawyer. Without a jury or judge, the two debaters can start to go after each other. Safety is lost.

2. **Ground Rules:** When decision rights are clear, set out ground rules. The goal of ground rules: create safety. Good conversations only take place when team members feel safe to express themselves openly and honestly. Leaders play a big part in creating safety. A major derailer of safety is retribution. If people have been “punished” for speaking their minds, then the precedent is set clearly: don’t be candid. Or else. Don’t oppose the boss’s view. Two very useful ground rules are:
 - a. **Mutual Purpose:** The beneficial outcome of the conversation should be very clear. For example, a highest-level goal could be “create a vision of success.” Presumably, everyone will agree to the importance of this goal. As we’ll cover below, however, the actual discussion should be narrowed down from this very broad topic.
 - b. **Mutual Respect:** Although all team members will typically pay lip service to this behavior, many toss it aside quickly once the debate starts. A useful way to think about preserving respect is to “stay on your side of the table.” If you imagine a table and you are sitting across from the other debater, stay on your side. Your side represents your reality, your views, your “space” (if you live in California). Any statement about the other person or his views is considered reaching across the table. An example: “That idea is wrong. It doesn’t make sense.” This language can be inflammatory, which is what you are trying to avoid. You have to stay away from the playground dialogue of:



“did so” “did not” “did so” “did not”. You could make the same point by saying: “I don’t see it that way. I don’t understand your point.” The difference is subtle but important. The first way invites a reactive response, it’s inflammatory. The second simply states your reality, without attacking the other person’s. It shows respect.

The term we use at FCG for non-inflammatory language is Forthright Diplomacy. Candid but tactful. Good debaters use both candor and curiosity.

3. **Problem Definition/Successful Outcome:** Using the example above, “create a vision of success” needs to be narrowed. Too many conversations we’ve witnessed eventually derail because the topic is too broad. Participants go off in different directions. Let’s use a real example involving “vision of success.” Participants should have a well-articulated goal and process. When FCG works with the vision question, we frame it by asking participants to think in terms of stakeholders: what does each of them want? What does success look like for Clients, Employees, and Owners? (We call this our “CEO” approach to vision.) To narrow and focus the conversation, we do one at a time. We may start with “what does success look like for your clients?” That framing usually creates an animated and focused conversation.
4. **Time Allotment:** As indicated above, another really good guideline—or boundary—is to make a clear statement about time. If people are long-winded or tend to filibuster, then use a smartphone to keep time for speaking, say 3 minutes to make your case. You can assign a specific person to be the “time cop.”
5. **Roles:** Another way to help debates stay on track is to have clearly assigned roles. The person with decision rights acts like the “judge” in the court room. They remain neutral as the debate rolls on. And bring down the gavel when someone is out of order: using inflammatory language. Other roles that are sometimes assigned are: time keeper (mentioned above), devil’s advocate (purposely stating the other side of the argument), subject matter expert (someone who presents “expert testimony” about the given topic). These typical roles are shown below:



These framing elements produce a better debate. Once established, the Open-Narrow-Close model offers a proven way to move through the decision making process. Using the CEO example above, here's how the ONC model works:

OPEN: This phase of the model is the creative “right brain” process of getting ideas on the table. Typical brainstorming rules apply: no criticism, go for quantity (not quality), challenge assumptions. In the CEO model, working with the “C” (Clients), the question might be, “What does success look like concerning clients?” A list might include:

- Retention rates
- Satisfaction levels
- Investment performance
- Client service
- Consistency
- Etc.

NARROW: The second phase, Narrow, brings in the “left brain,” which begins to analyze and categorize the data. Many investment professionals are especially good at this process. The problem is that they start doing their “thing” while still in the OPEN phase. This mistake we call “premature evaluation.” And we liken it to driving on both sides of the road. (American vs. British rules of the road) If you are allowing motorists to drive on both sides simultaneously, a mess will ensue. Same with discussions. The leader (judge) must watch for this derailer and bang the gavel when it occurs. In this narrowing phase, the real debate takes place. It is appropriate here for both sides of a given topic to present their best thinking. And to provide point-counter-point. The key is to be able to do this in the spirit of safety and respect. Two particularly powerful phrases that help are: “I see it differently...” (vs. “You’re wrong...”) and “Help me understand...” (vs. “You’re not making sense...”).

Note: Safety does not imply soft or superficial debates. Quite the contrary. “Hard on the ideas, easy on the people” is the mantra. When FCG facilitates a debate, we encourage probing, prodding, and provocative questions. But that can be done in a respectful way. And safety implies no retribution. I’m

not punished for asking a hard question. And I'm not humiliated for responding, "I don't know." As long as it's followed up by "But I'll find out."

CLOSE: After ideas have been properly vetted in the time frame allotted. The Decision Rights holder (or time cop) recognizes that the time is up for debate and moves towards a decision based on the already-determined method.

A good debate should end with a decision and action step. This involves clarity on: Who will do What by When? Too many good decisions are watered down or lost completely by sloppy execution. This is a longer topic for another day.

This process for open and productive debate works. But it requires conscious leadership and proactive participation. Leaders must do what good leaders do: establish rules and order. And they must pay attention to the tone of the debate. If it becomes personal and disrespectful, then intervene. For example, suggest that the conversation has dropped under the line (without blaming anyone) and that a five minute break would be helpful. Participants are responsible for understanding and following the process. Importantly, by practicing respect and avoiding inflammatory language. And remember: the key to successful debates is safety. When that is lost, the group's only goal is to get it back. Nothing productive happens when people are defensive. Safety sounds so simple, but is very hard to achieve in practice. We all have our insecurities and they are easily triggered. Welcome to the delicate art of open and productive debate. Like anything worthwhile, it takes time and attention to do it well.

Respectfully,

JW