
THE POWER OF ‘ROBUST DIALOGUE’

Robust Dialogue starts when people go in with an open mind. They’re not trapped by preconceptions or armed with a private agenda. They want to hear new information and choose the best alternatives, so they listen to all sides of the debate and make their own contributions.

When people speak candidly, they express their real opinions, not those that will please the power players or maintain harmony. Indeed, harmony - sought by many leaders who wish to offend no one - can be the enemy of truth. It can squelch critical thinking and drive decision making underground.

When harmony prevails, here’s how things often get settled: after the key players leave the session, they quietly veto decisions they don’t like but didn’t debate on the spot. A good motto to observe is “Truth over harmony.”

Candour helps wipe out the silent lies and pocket vetoes, and it prevents the stalled initiatives and rework that drain energy.

Informality is critical to candour. It was one of Jack Welch’s bywords. Formality suppresses dialogue; informality encourages it. Formal conversations and presentations leave little room for debates. They suggest that everything is scripted and predetermined. Informal dialogue is open. It invites questions, encouraging spontaneity and critical thinking.

At a meeting in a formal, hierarchical setting, a powerful player can get away with killing a good idea. But informality encourages people to test their thinking, to experiment, and to cross-check. It enables them to take risks among colleagues, bosses, and subordinates. Informality gets the truth out. It surfaces out-of-the-box ideas - the ideas that may seem absurd at first hearing but that create breakthroughs.

Finally, Robust Dialogue ends with closure. At the end of the meeting, people agree about what each person has to do and when. They’ve committed to it in an open forum; they are accountable for the outcomes.

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