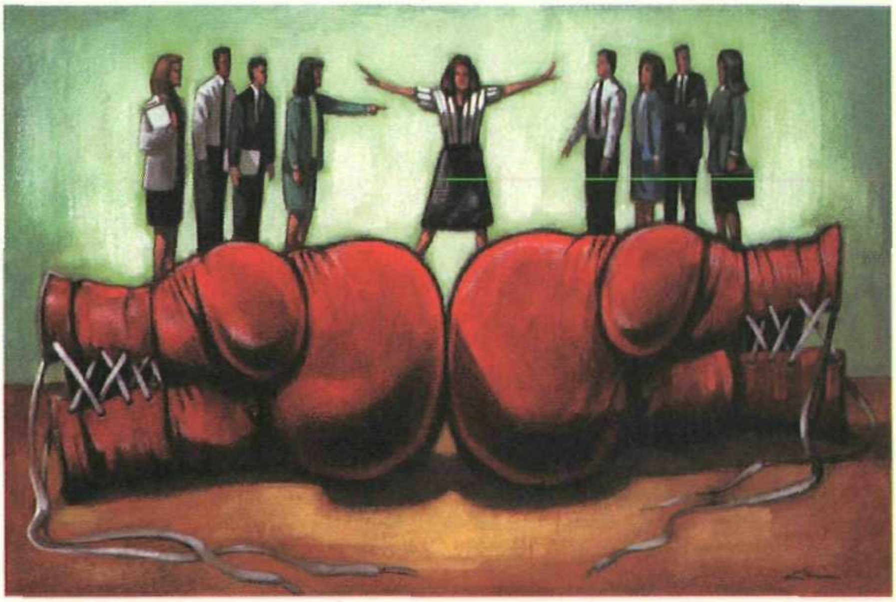
Executive EDGE

HELPING TEAMS FIGHT FAIR


Chris McAllister

Successful top managers are skilled at keeping a lid on conflict. While they encourage members of management teams to thoroughly debate issues, they are adept at preventing those debates from degenerating into quarrels.

Skilled managers often urge their teams to employ six tactics:

• Focus on facts. When teams lack sufficient data, they tend to get bogged down in guesses, opinions, and personalities. But when teams base their discussions on facts, they move smoothly toward decisions.

• Multiply the alternatives. When teams debate only two options, members tend to choose one side or the other, polarizing the discussion. But when teams face three or four alternatives, members feel free to move back and forth among them, thus diffusing potential conflict.

• Create common goals. Teams that have such goals are more likely to be cohesive.

• Use humor. When tension is on the rise, team members tend to personalize issues, which can lead to conflict. Smart managers inject humor, thus allowing team members to distance themselves from the issues.

• Balance the power structure. Autocratic team leaders often generate distrust among the other members. Weak leadership, on the other hand, often encourages politicking. On productive teams, power is balanced among the team leader and other members.

• Seek consensus with qualification. Teams that seek unanimity in their decision making often find themselves mired in frustration. Effective teams follow a two-step process: Team members discuss the issue, trying to reach a consensus. If they cannot agree, the senior member makes the decision. In either case, the opinions of all have been heard and the decision has been made.

From Kathleen M. Eisenhardt, Jean L. Kahwajy, and L. J. Bourgeois, "How Management Teams Can Have a Good Fight," Harvard Business Review, *July-August 1997, pp. 77-85.*

TAKE TIME TO REFLECT

Between voice mail, e-mail, meetings, and memos, busy executives may feel that they don't have time to just sit around and think. And that just may be their biggest mistake, according to Michael Hammer and Steven A. Stanton, business consultants who won fame as advocates of corporate reengineering. In considering the question of why companies are often unable to maintain success over time—examples include Pan Am, Sears, and Howard Johnson's—Hammer and Stanton conclude that all these failures share one underlying cause: a failure to reflect.

Objective self-assessment is vital in a rapidly changing world, as is the ability to ask questions, to look at accepted assumptions from a different perspective, and to think without the usual preconceptions. This is a difficult task, and so reflection—thinking—should be built into the business process.

Reflection can become a process by breaking it down into tasks.

• Develop customer insight. Get to know their unmet needs and anticipate their purchasing decisions.

• Monitor the broad environment. Major cultural and political shifts will affect your business; preparation for their effects is key.

• Develop competitor intelligence. Study competitor's actions to determine their strategies and plans.

• Perform honest self-assessment. Has your organization, lulled by success, lost its cutting edge? Evaluate your operational performance and organizational cultural commitment.

• Develop mind expansion. Think creatively to break out of accustomed patterns and perceive information in a new light.

• Question your fundamental assumptions. Change can cause assumptions to lose their validity; don't cling to business tenets that will no longer foster success.

From Michael Hammer and Steven A. Stanton, "The Power of Reflection," Fortune, *November 24, 1997, pp. 291-296.*