

Need ideas? Take a Walk in the Woods



Creating a more idea- and innovation-friendly culture within an organisation can help to facilitate change that leads to improved work processes and overall performance. However, the quest for the best idea may lead to conflict or disagreement between individuals.

Consider this example: It's time to acquire an electronic medical record system, and one healthcare executive had definite ideas as to what kind of EMR system was best for the hospital. Several of his subordinates disagreed. He encouraged open debate and they went back and forth.

Debates within organisations can be deceptively easy to slip into "battles for the triumph of your idea rather than a spirited quest for the best idea," says Eric J. McNulty, director of research at the National Preparedness Leadership Initiative at the Harvard School of Public Health. "It's a natural impulse — few people have been formally trained to argue and critique and, after all, we work in highly competitive environments. Despite our higher-ups encouraging us to collaborate, winning is too often the dominant goal."

In a *strategy+business* blog post, McNulty discusses a negotiation method called "the Walk in the Woods." (This moniker comes from an event in 1982, when American and Soviet arms negotiators resolved an impasse at a summit after having a conversation during a walk in the woods.) The aim is to enhance collaboration, negotiation, and conflict resolution in organisational settings.

Learn to listen. It is easy to focus on your own position, but you also should be paying as much attention to opposing views. In this initial phase of negotiation, each party expresses its own self-interest and, as important, the other parties are encouraged to actively listen. Everything goes more productively when each party feels it has truly been heard.

List any points of agreement. Listing points of agreement reveals common interests that help lay the groundwork for joint problem solving. And they almost always outnumber points of disagreement when you include desired outcomes, values, and other broader items. The other party can begin to see you as a partner in the search for the best result, not simply an advocate of your own ideas.

Acknowledge what you've learned from your target. This demonstrates that you're open to considering other ideas and willing to modify your position when presented with compelling evidence. In a collaborative setting, this sets the stage for "innovative brainstorming". In adversarial situations, it may help soften your opponent's defences.

Capture new points of agreement. This aligning of interests is made possible by creating a problem-solution environment in which all can claim some victory. "The positive nature of the process is as important as the actual agreement, as it demonstrates the benefits and possibilities of moving beyond adversarial combat," McNulty writes.

If your goal truly is the best outcome for your organisation, the author says it pays to learn how to argue and critique properly and productively.

Source: [strategy+business](#)

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