

Leadership Thought: Could We Just Talk?

While CFOs may like actions more than words, don't underestimate the value of discourse in decision making.

Bud Kulesza

Like many CFOs, perhaps you've had a recent experience in regard to handling a particular issue in your organization that was marked by disagreement and extended discussion. Discourse during issue resolution often seems counterproductive as we strive to meet deadlines. On some occasions in my past role as CFO of ITT Automotive, I recall wishing we had less talk and more action as we completed our tasks.

Have you experienced similar frustration? Take a moment to reflect on what occurred. You may come to realize, as I did, that those disagreements served a purpose. Rather than considering such a discourse to be a "fly in the ointment," I began to think about how it may have actually helped me make better decisions.

Promoting Disagreement

Within our global business environment, changes are so rapid that it is not realistic to expect everyone to always be up-to-date on everything. From accounting updates to legislative and business changes, best practice is often drawn on the collective knowledge of the entire staff. In order to accomplish that, we need an environment that promotes open discussion.

Following through on intentions to have such discourse is no easy task because of the time pressures we all face. Yet if we don't make the best decisions possible, we may be faced with correcting or redoing our efforts later. The adage "it's better to measure twice and cut once" is very applicable here. Don't fall into the trap of never having the time to do it right but always having the time to do it over.

I am reminded of how, as a young accountant, my first supervisor said to me, "Bud, if you and I continue to agree, one of us is not necessary." In an attempt to create new viewpoints, he encouraged me to disagree and challenged us to consider all aspects of an issue.

What Does This Mean for CFOs?

As a CFO, you are in a great position to establish such an environment. It doesn't need to be a time-consuming, delaying process, but rather it should be an ongoing process that values diverse input and discussion. Ask your people to challenge the status quo and offer opposing and diverse views as decisions are being made, without fear of repercussions. Make no mistake: it is possible to disagree without being disagreeable. Honor differences of opinion and lead the staff in supporting decisions once they are made. You'll likely find that such discourse will increase your organization's competitive position, as your company consistently makes superior business decisions.

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