

KEEP THE CANARIES SINGING IN YOUR MEETINGS

By Rhonda Sparks-Tranks
First published 2016



Organisations can invest tremendous amounts of money, energy and time trying to build cohesiveness in teams, leadership groups and decision / planning meetings. But when it comes to teams and groups, I don't necessarily equate cohesive with effective. When sticking together means not challenging each other's thinking cohesiveness is dysfunctional.

Many years ago I was on a committee that made a decision to do something I strongly disagreed with. It involved an "internal loan" using money that had come from donations. I was new to the committee and recall with shame that I didn't speak up to express my concerns about the ethics of the decision. Instead I allowed a powerful, charismatic individual to push through his proposal.

Why didn't I speak up? Many reasons but perhaps the strongest was reputational pressure (discussed below). The committee took a round the table straw vote – the proposer spoke first then asked his mate sitting next to him to speak. What happened was the cascade effect. I was the last to speak and by then everyone else had indicated agreement, so I went along with everyone else! Afterwards I learned that others shared my view but also felt uncomfortable in challenging what appeared to be a group agreement. I think many of us have experienced something similar. Since then, I have fallen prey to the same trap over and over. Why? Perhaps the meetings were structured in ways that dissenting or warning voices were actively discouraged.

When a group meets to make decisions a high degree of consensus is important for the group to be aligned behind the decisions and committed to their implementation. But not before exploring options and unearthing the implications and risks behind those choices. As a facilitator I work to strengthen the group's capacity to challenge each other's thinking and surface underlying conflict and differences.



Who has experienced the situation in this cartoon?
You may often hear facilitators say "the wisdom is in the room" but that is not necessarily the case as this article on [Making Dumb Groups Smarter](#) suggests. Quoting from Sunstein and Hastie's article there are two main errors in groups:

"informational signals" (some group members receive incorrect signals from other members) and "reputational pressures" (people silence themselves or change their views to avoid serious penalties). These two factors lead to four separate but interrelated problems: (1) Groups don't merely fail to correct their members' errors; they amplify them. (2) They fall victim to cascade effects, following the statements and actions of those who went first. (3) They become polarized, taking even more extreme positions than originally. (4) They focus on "what everybody knows," ignoring critical information that only one or two members have.

The authors offer some sensible, simple suggestions for making groups wiser. I agree with some of the authors' suggestions for improvement e.g. assigning roles and "red-teaming". Other suggestions need to be used with care e.g. appointing a devil's advocate or "silencing" the leader. When running facilitation training I say that a key role for a facilitator is to ensure all voices are not just heard but that voices of warning or concern are properly attended to.

Now we come to the important role of canaries in your meetings. This relates to “focusing on what everybody knows and ignoring critical information that only one or two members have” (problem # 4 in the HBR article referred to above). In the first half of the 20th Century, coal miners took canaries into the mines. Canaries are particularly sensitive to the toxic gases found in coalmines. While the canaries could sing the miners were safe. A silent / dead canary was an indication of imminent danger. In the case of meetings as long as your "canaries" are singing it is a reassuring signal of the good health of your meeting environment.

History is littered with tragic stories of leaders and groups ignoring, silencing or ridiculing voices of warning - stories that ended in misfortune or disaster. The Bay of Pigs fiasco, the Titanic, Lehman Brothers, Kodak - the list goes on and I'm sure you can think of others closer to home for you.

There is a right time in a meeting to encourage different perspectives and dissenting views: earlier rather than later and preferably incorporated into the process design with the use of appropriate methods. That said a last minute flag of concern should be attended to.

I have a number of structured process tools in my kit that are taught in my facilitation training. But here are a couple of very simple things you can incorporate to your meetings to ensure the canaries continue to sing and their song is valued:

- if two similar viewpoints are expressed in succession then ask for a different perspective.
- regularly move to small group discussions where everyone is tasked with speaking and actively listening to different ideas and options
- move away from board table meetings and have discussions in a semi-circle around a shared information / “sticky” wall.
- ask people to write down their ideas before talking about them. Use larger pieces of same-coloured paper written in thick markers so that ideas can be easily read by everyone, not just those close to the wall. Put papers up on the wall for discussion. This allows individual reflection and prevents domination by the most vocal. It also introduces a degree of anonymity around the ideas, so they are more likely to be discussed on value not because of who suggested the idea
- task everyone to seek alternative views and to genuinely explore others' ideas

Professional facilitators have a range of structured processes to encourage diverse thinking and challenging of perspectives. A facilitator should be working to develop group relationships that can withstand conflict and robust dialogue and should help the group hold the discomfort of ambiguity rather than leap to solutions.

And a final hint - never call your canary Cassandra. Now that would be a curse!

Rhonda Sparks-Tranks

B.A. Certified Professional Facilitator, Master

Rhonda has decades of experience as a trainer, coach and facilitator working with major corporations and organisations around the world. Her facilitation focus is usually: navigating organisational change after restructures, strategic direction setting and planning, and team development - particularly when work relationships have become dysfunctional.



RHONDA SPARKS
facilitator | coach | celebrant

illuminating pathways for change

e rhonda@illumiconsulting.com.au t +61 (0) 410 510 720 w www.illumiconsulting.com.au