

Book Review of Michael A. Roberto's (2013) *Why Great Leaders Don't Take Yes for
an Answer: A Synopsis of Michael A. Roberto's Philosophy*

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Michael A. Roberto's (2005; 2013) book, *Why Great Leaders Don't Take Yes for an Answer* challenges contemporary views of conflict management. Throughout the book he describes the pressure on managers and subordinates to agree with and say what they feel leaders want to hear, often resulting in destruction. Roberto's work provides guidance through four broad sections including conflict, consensus, candor and indecisions, which help leaders pick up cues from a team to determine if they are satisfied with what they hear, or if a further resolution is required. Throughout Roberto's (2013) edition are illustrations of collaborative leadership, where leaders recognize the need for change through creative and innovative techniques that utilize groups of different thinkers.

The beginning chapters go through the leadership challenge and describe catastrophes in history that resulted from the lack of conflict. Chapter one reviews the explosions of the Deepwater Horizon oil rig in 2010, the Bay of Pigs brigade in 1961, and the Mount Everest devastation that took four lives of trained professionals. Leaders cannot always be aware if they are receiving constructive conflict or candor, so it is vital for them to pick up cues from their audience and make smarter decisions. Roberto (2005, 2013) explains that the decision-making process is more important than what decision to make. Deciding how can be broken down into four concepts that include composition, context, communication and control. Collaborative leaders must master these four concepts to set the tone for conflict and help bring resolution.

Roberto suggests that these issues arose because teammates were not comfortable telling their leaders that their decisions may be wrong. With regards to the Bay of Pigs, President

Kennedy retrospectively realized that his actions were inadequate, and then created proactive learning for future issues. He understood that people were afraid to tell him, “no”, and he would often find a sea of blank stares that he acknowledged as an agreement rather than an objection. Kennedy took on a new role and had advisors participate in discussions as “skeptical generalists” and devil’s advocates. As a collaborative leader, Kennedy openly shared information and knowledge and encouraged suggestions and ideas from everyone. He also removed himself from preliminary meetings so the team could feel less insecure and provide more honest feedback. Because President Kennedy was able to recognize these conflict issues and make changes, the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 went far smoother than the decisions for the Bay of Pigs a year earlier (2005). The contrast between President Kennedy’s two issues and the different ways in which they were perceived, reviewed and acted on provides Roberto’s best example of collaborative leadership, deciding on a decision-making process and keeping conflict constructive.

Roberto (2005; 2013) also provides four tools that assist with creating conflict management. One crucial tool of collaborative leadership is facilitating brainstorming by utilizing such things as role playing. Acting out various roles gets members out of their element and into the mindset of others, which opens dialect and candor. The second tool involves mental simulation techniques, such as scenario playing. This technique is particularly useful because it can provide other plan options for when things may go astray. The third tool utilizes conceptual models and frameworks, which create dialogue from different vantage points. Finally, he suggests making some “watch out” situations, so the intentions of debates remain on point. One can argue that Roberto provides four great tools to assist with conflict management, as long as

the task at hand has the time and availability to be thoroughly researched and argued. One weakness in Roberto's philosophy is time. Since cognitive conflict can be time intensive, leaders facing urgent issues must make decisions based on the information provided. Collaborative leaders understand the balance between problem-solving and project deadlines, and Roberto's tools can potentially help with participation, engagement, and resolution.

Further in his book, Roberto (2013) goes through the fair and legitimate processes of conflict, where he explains the different leader techniques that demonstrate consideration. The methods include providing a process roadmap, reinforcing an open mindset, listening actively, explaining the decision rationale, explaining how input has been used and expressing appreciation. Roberto posits "The theory is simple: no surprises!". Roberto reminds the reader that utilizing different techniques within this process will help both the leader and followers become unison. Traditional leaders may think that it is their responsibility to be well versed and knowledgeable on all aspects of a problem when collaborative leaders understand that problem solving requires insight and input from more than one source. Open information sharing benefits the resolution process by removing the ambiguity of knowledge from the group. When all team members have access to the same information, it is then that different ideas can emerge from the discussion.

A final piece that Roberto delivers involves reaching closure. His example of General Dwight D. Eisenhower during World War II explained that difficult decisions were necessary while dealing with the pressures of competing demands. Eisenhower's strategy was to break down complex issues into more manageable parts before making a decision. The fact that Eisenhower's end decisions were finite meant that closure was able to be met and the General

and his team could move forward. The reviewer feels that Roberto's Eisenhower example firmly explains that decisions need to be thought out and ultimately closed as not to create confusion or further conflict. Collaborative leaders such as Eisenhower understand the need to address issues and resolutions promptly to move forward towards the next task or goal.

Authors Runde and Flanagan (2010) from The Center for Creative Leadership cite Roberto's work as the basis for *Developing Your Conflict Competence*. The book explains that managers are less familiar with the term cognitive conflict, but recognize the positive words such as resolution and opportunity to describe task conflict and favorable outcomes. The authors agree with Roberto's philosophy that leaders need to stay focused on cognitive conflict and ways of solving the problem for creative solutions and effective decisions.

Overall, the reviewer believes that Roberto's (2005; 2013) book creatively explains new views on conflict management and constructive dissent, as well as provides successful ways collaborative leaders facilitate learning and development. One can argue there have been countless times in history where leaders could have been more productive or successful if peers or team members would have spoken up about impending issues. Roberto uses real life examples to address problems and provide resolution, teaching the reader to speak out when necessary and to overcome difficult or dysfunctional conflict. The collaborative leadership approach is growing as companies are learning that traditional leadership falls short on engagement and resolution (retrieved from <http://blog.innocentive.com/2013/11/21/8-differences-between-traditional-and-collaborative-leaders>). The modern workplace needs avenues of substantive conflict, open candor and the availability of open discussion to maintain innovation and success.

References

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