

Working through the ZOULD

“ Never has it been more necessary for management teams to be able to work through the Zone of Uncomfortable Debate (ZOULD) – that unspoken process that prevents us from questioning too closely the things that are held dear in business. ”

Most senior managers find their executive team difficult. ‘Dysfunctional’ is a favourite word. Testing dynamics, political agendas, big personalities, strong opinions (and voices to match), too much or too little control is the reality for many. Not surprisingly, they find the real work of the management team - tackling the big strategic and business performance issues - challenging at the best of times.

But times have changed. The unprecedented business challenges of the recession have tested teams with tough choices and urgent decisions. Difficult decisions about what, where, how, and how deep to cut for efficiency whilst sustaining capability in a radically changed financial environment.

These issues now give way to even more demanding questions about positioning in the dynamic landscape of new and changing customer preferences, dwindling markets and outdated practices; but at the same time booming opportunities and the high gain, high risk potential of growth strategies. At no time in the recent past have business teams needed to be more able to address the basics, to challenge themselves to identify their business core capability, yet at the same time take swift and decisive action. Never has it been more necessary for management teams to be able to work through the Zone of Uncomfortable Debate (ZOULD) - that unspoken process that prevents us from questioning too closely the things that are held dear in business. Such discussions all too easily dissolve into hostility, power plays, ridicule, escape mechanisms or delay tactics.

Seventy senior managers from fifteen executive teams attending Cranfield's High Performance Business Team programme shared their experiences of the ZOULD. What prevents productive discussion on ‘difficult’ issues and how can managers handle vital but tricky business decisions? Here are some of their collective insights on what gets in the way:

- Insufficient knowledge of others' agendas and views
- Others inability to discuss difficult issues
- Fear of uncontrolled emotions
- Assuming you need the answer to ask the question
- Prejudging the answer
- Fear of surprises
- Lacking confidence in a productive outcome.

How to work through the ZOULD

1. Prepare people, process and place

Give people the opportunity to prepare; rotate the Chair; legitimise and spread the responsibility for asking challenging questions by taking turns to be ‘devil's advocate’; ensure sufficient agenda time; choose a comfortable or different location for ZOULD discussions.

2. Make ZOULD discussions an executive team competence

Be clear why it is important for the team to talk about ZOULD issues; recognise the natural difficulties that everyone experiences; agree ‘rules of engagement’.

3. Find the right starting point and pace for ‘too difficult’ issues by taking a stepwise approach

Is there agreement there is an issue to discuss? What is the issue? What are the decisions to be taken? What needs to be understood better to make those decisions? What are the decision-making options? What are the pros and cons of each? What factors should guide choice and what weight should they have?

4. Maintain a productive perspective

Keep a business (not personal) focus; and keep a long term and bigger picture perspective. Focus on issues (not personalities) and ensure everyone gets heard.

5. Act with emotional intelligence and political awareness

Manage your own emotions; don't leave others to guess your worthy intentions. Strive to understand what is driving others' views. Ask questions to gain understanding (rather than trade dogmatic statements); facilitate progress (e.g. how can we move on? What would help us to clarify this? What are we trying to work towards here?)

6. Leave the ZOULD before leaving the room

Put the discussion and its value in perspective: why it was important; the natural difficulty felt; what's been achieved by all and agree the next steps.

The ability to work effectively in the ‘Zone of Uncomfortable Debate’ is a capability that distinguishes effective management teams from the rest. It may even be rare enough to make such teams very special. **MF**

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