

BUILDING BETTER IDEAS

**How Constructive
Debate Inspires
Courage, Collaboration,
and Breakthrough
Solutions**

B. Kim Barnes

Bestselling Author of
Exercising Influence

BUILDING

BETTER IDEAS

This page intentionally left blank

BUILDING BETTER IDEAS

How Constructive Debate Inspires Courage,
Collaboration, and Breakthrough Solutions

B. Kim Barnes



Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

Building Better Ideas

Copyright © 2019 by B. Kim Barnes

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, write to the publisher, addressed "Attention: Permissions Coordinator," at the address below.



Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

1333 Broadway, Suite 1000

Oakland, CA 94612-1921



Tel: (510) 817-2277, Fax: (510) 817-2278

www.bkconnection.com

Ordering information for print editions

Quantity sales. Special discounts are available on quantity purchases by corporations, associations, and others. For details, contact the "Special Sales Department" at the Berrett-Koehler address above.

Individual sales. Berrett-Koehler publications are available through most bookstores. They can also be ordered directly from Berrett-Koehler: Tel: (800) 929-2929; Fax: (802) 864-7626; www.bkconnection.com

Orders for college textbook/course adoption use. Please contact Berrett-Koehler: Tel: (800) 929-2929; Fax: (802) 864-7626.

Distributed to the U.S. trade and internationally by Penguin Random House Publisher Services.

Berrett-Koehler and the BK logo are registered trademarks of Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

First Edition

Paperback print edition ISBN 978-1-5230-8558-3

PDF e-book ISBN 978-1-5230-8559-0

IDPF e-book ISBN 978-1-5230-8560-6

Digital audio ISBN 978-1-5230-8562-0

2019-1

Book producer: Westchester Publishing Services

Text designer: Courtney Baker

Cover designer: Paula Goldstein

This book is dedicated to the memory of Margaret Fuller, an American journalist, author, and promoter of intelligent “Conversations” among men and women in the early nineteenth century. A friend of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Horace Mann, and other luminaries of her time, she sought recognition for women as intellectual equals and encouraged her friends and those she mentored, male and female, to speak up and speak out on important questions of her era.

I also dedicate this book to my supportive team and associates at Barnes & Conti, especially Rebecca Hendricks, who worked closely with me to develop the concepts discussed in this book. Rebecca offers me the essential combination of support and challenge whenever we collaborate. I am grateful for all our constructive debates.

B. Kim Barnes

This page intentionally left blank

Contents

Introduction: Why Do We Always Have
to Have “The Meeting *After* the Meeting?” ■ 1

PART ONE. Where Are the Good Ideas?: The Need for Constructive Debate ■ 9

1. What Is Constructive Debate? ■ 11
2. How Do We Form Ideas and Arrive at a Position? ■ 15
3. Power, Fear, Apathy, and Groupthink: Why Do Bad Ideas
Get a Pass? ■ 23

PART TWO. How to Build Better Ideas: Learning the Skills of Constructive Debate ■ 33

4. Introduction to the Skills of Constructive Debate ■ 35
5. Expressing Ideas ■ 43
6. Engaging Others ■ 50
7. Exploring Views ■ 59
8. Challenging Positions ■ 66

PART THREE. Designing for Better Ideas: Implementing Constructive Debate ■ 77

9. Establishing the Conditions for Constructive Debate ■ 79
10. Facilitating the Process of a Constructive Debate ■ 86

II. Developing and Maintaining a Culture and Processes
that Encourage Breakthrough Solutions ■ 94

Conclusion: Building Better Ideas ■ 102

Appendix 1: Skills and Tools for Facilitating a Constructive Debate ■ 107

Appendix 2: Constructive Debate Planning ■ 115

Appendix 3: Tools and Templates ■ 119

Notes ■ 147

Selected Bibliography ■ 149

Index ■ 151

About the Author ■ 155

BUILDING

BETTER IDEAS

This page intentionally left blank

Introduction

Why Do We Always Have to Have

"The Meeting After the Meeting?"

It's three o'clock. Your product development team meeting has just ended. And here you are in the break room with most of the other team members.

"Can you believe what Jason just proposed?"

"I can. It's the same thing he's proposed for the last four meetings."

"Only the names were changed to protect the guilty!"

"Does he even know what century we're in? That's three product cycles ago, for two of our competitors."

"I could have told him that idea will never fly in today's market."

"I have a much better idea, but he'd never go for it."

"So, why didn't anybody say anything?"

"He's the boss."

Meanwhile, near the manager's office . . .

“Nobody had any ideas today, as usual. I think people are just checked out.”

“Maybe we need some different people—more creative ones?”

“I doubt that we could attract any real innovators. The culture seems to reward people who don’t rock the boat.”

If any of this sounds familiar, you’re not alone. Ideas are the lifeblood of organizations in the current climate; but having a constant flow of new and interesting ideas to explore, develop, test, and bring to market is not a given. Three major factors contribute to the dearth of great ideas:

- First, few ideas are great to begin with. They have to be questioned, critiqued, improved, and developed, and then they must compete with other ideas for support, commitment, and resources.
- Second, few people have been well trained in the skills that enable them to work with their own and others’ ideas in a tough, honest, competitive, and yet collaborative way.
- And third, organizational politics, tribal loyalties, and human emotions such as fear of loss are a powerful, yet sometimes invisible, factor in communication and decision-making within organizations.

What Do We Mean When We Use the Word “Idea”?

An idea, at least in the sense we use the word in organizations, is a thought or opinion that is formulated and can be expressed. Ideas are the way we frame our thinking about a specific topic. Some ideas are fixed—we form them early and seldom change them. They become part of our worldview and are the basis for testing the truth of other information or opinions. Other ideas are more tentative, less solid, and open to new experiences, experiments, or the influence of other people.

In a time when innovation—that is, creating value from an idea that’s new to you—is key to the success of many organizations, high-

quality ideas are an extremely valuable currency. In fact, they are the raw material for innovation. Paul Romer, a co-winner of the 2018 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences, has shown that new ideas are the fuel for long-term economic growth and that organizations need to invest in research and development. They also need to support improved patent laws to encourage innovation.¹ Those investments can best pay off when potential innovators thrive in welcoming environments. Organizations will risk obsolescence or failure if they can't respond with new and powerful ideas to customer needs, changing technology, social and cultural movements, competitive pressure, political or environmental crises, and unexpected opportunities.

So, Whose Job Is It to Generate Ideas?

While generating ideas is seldom part of a formal job description, it's hard to think of a job where that skill wouldn't be relevant. Anyone who has worked in an organization will be aware that a large proportion of problems that frontline employees face will never reach the senior executive level. It's common wisdom that those who are closest to the problem or opportunity are in the best position to deal with it. If the only person with the responsibility and permission to generate ideas is a formal leader or a designated professional, there are probably too many people in the "room." Any organization can benefit from a workforce that is both expected to be and skillful in being creative and forthcoming with suggestions and proposals.

A few years ago, a large client organization approached me with a need that they described in the following way: "We need to get rid of the 'meeting after the meeting' where people discuss what they *really* thought and felt during the actual meeting, but didn't say. We want to help our people stop bad ideas from getting a pass, and then encourage them to put new ideas forward, even if they might be partial and 'unbaked'—or at least very different from our current common wisdom. Can you develop a training program that would help with this?"

On hearing the presenting issues, I first explored with them the possibility that they were looking for skills in interpersonal or intergroup communication or perhaps in conflict resolution. While my own company had existing programs in those arenas, it soon became clear to all of us that the issue was not really conflict, but rather the *fear* of conflict or of loss—loss of security, status, or relationship, for example. This fear suppressed people’s willingness to suggest unusual or innovative ideas or to risk criticizing ideas promoted by leaders. I suggested that there may not have been any actual conflict to manage or resolve. In fact, the client group described the organizational culture as “conflict-averse.” Next, I inquired whether a better set of influencing skills (also a specialty of my company) might be useful. In fact, they thought the primary approach to getting their people to agree was power, whether used overtly, or below the radar, or even unconsciously. While influence skills might have been useful, once some interesting ideas had been put out there to compete for support, the real problems were that the ideas laid on the table—often by senior managers or those who wanted to curry favor with them—tended to be obvious, weak, or traditional, and that little effort was made to criticize or improve them. Once a leader mentioned or approved of an idea, other ideas rarely emerged from the group.

Clearly, leaders in that organization needed to do a much better job of inviting and welcoming alternatives, while at the same time the company culture needed to become more supportive of engagement and healthy competition of ideas. Perhaps because of the existing climate, team members appeared to have a skills deficit. When I identified an apparent unwillingness, inhibition, or inability on the part of many team members to risk speaking up to make bad ideas better, or to develop small ideas into robust ones (without provoking interpersonal conflict), the client agreed that this situation was worth targeting for improvement. My team would work on skill development, but we would also do our best to help them move their culture toward one that welcomed constructive discussion, disagreement, and debate, all the while supporting their strategic initiatives related to change and innovation.

Why Don't People Speak Up?

Organizational or team cultures that discourage disagreement and debate risk missing ideas that could transform their business results, create greater efficiency, or help them to become a great place to work, attracting the best talent. Those ideas, or at least the seeds of them, walk out the actual or virtual door of their company every day between the ears of team members. Worse, ignoring, not requesting, or not providing honest feedback can lead to disastrous results, financial or otherwise. Serious errors of judgment can, and do, occur when people assume that those who are senior to them in rank or experience can never be questioned. When people who wish to express unusual or unpopular ideas and opinions are silenced, directly or indirectly, disasters can and do happen.

In a classic example of this, the Rogers Commission report² on the causes of the spaceship *Challenger's* fatal accident in 1986, stated:

. . . failures in communication . . . resulted in a decision to launch 51-L [Challenger] based on incomplete and sometimes misleading information, a conflict between engineering data and management judgments, and a NASA management structure that permitted internal flight safety problems to bypass key Shuttle managers.

Morton Thiokol, an engineering company involved in building the *Challenger*, was at that time hoping to win more contracts with NASA. The company's senior managers did not listen to the engineers on the project when they stated their safety concerns about the shuttle's O-rings. The senior managers—who actually knew about the issues and could have stopped the launch—made the fatal decision to agree to go ahead with it. The lack of major checks and balances, the hope for additional business, and the hierarchical nature of the decision-making at both Morton Thiokol and NASA at the time meant that those in the best position to know about the risks were not listened to. As a result, seven crew members died.

During the U.S. Senate hearing that concluded with the Rogers Report, two of the engineers responded as follows:

“I was not even asked to participate. I did not agree. . . . I was never asked or polled, it was clearly a management position. There was no point in me doing anything further. I really did all I could to stop the launch.”

“I remember distinctly at the time [wondering] whether I would have the courage if asked, what I would do . . . whether I would be alone. . . . I didn’t think I’d be alone, but I was wondering if I would have the courage, I remember that distinctly, to stand up and say ‘No.’”

When neither alternative solutions nor critical feedback are invited or welcomed in an organization, it’s almost inevitable that certain consequences will result: Resources will be wasted on mediocre ideas that fail or don’t perform as hoped, and talented people with better ideas will eventually take those ideas elsewhere.

Many leaders do things, intentionally or not, that discourage their own people from weighing in openly on ideas or decisions. The leaders may begin discussions by announcing their own proposals, seeking agreement rather than a critique or a number of alternatives. They may become defensive when their assumptions are challenged or their rationale is questioned. Or they may run with the first halfway-decent idea expressed by a team member, instead of probing for other ideas so that the group would have a variety to choose from. They may, without even being aware of their actions or motives, favor people who agree with them and punish those with different opinions. This sends a message to others in the group or team about what is safe and “politically correct.”

At the same time, many team members may lack experience, skill, or the confidence in their ability to speak up, to disagree, and to initiate or participate in a robust discussion—what we will come to call a “constructive debate”: one that can lead to better, stronger, and more successful ideas.

Are teams in your organization making great decisions? Do they consider alternative, even competing, points of view before they decide to act? Are the right people invited in to the process, and then really listened to? Do team members build on one another’s ideas to

improve them? Do teams avoid playing politics and instead keep a rigorous focus on developing promising concepts and solutions? Do members avoid defensiveness and ask for feedback? Can creative, unusual, and even risky ideas get a hearing? Can people disagree and remain good colleagues? Or, is your organization one where “the meeting after the meeting” is the norm—a follow-up event in which people express their *real* opinions after they have allowed a suboptimal or mediocre idea to move forward? Is yours an organization whose people typically hesitate to disagree openly with conventional wisdom, an organization where fear of failure or even minor conflict means that potentially great ideas may never get expressed?

As a formal or informal leader, you are in a position to help change the culture—the norms and practices that govern the way the people you lead behave. Whether as a trusted advisor, business partner, organizational consultant, coach, change leader, or facilitator, you can support and promote a culture where “constructive debate” becomes the norm.

So, How Does This Apply to Me?

A constructive debate is one in which a diverse group of individuals can express their ideas, engage others in building on and improving them, explore ideas deeply, and challenge one another’s positions in a fair and productive way.

In this book, you’ll learn a set of behaviors you can model and encourage, as well as a process you can facilitate, lead, or support your client in leading. The process enables a group or team to:

- consider a variety of ideas before making a decision
- invite the expression of diverse points of view
- avoid “groupthink” and “playing it safe”
- discourage defensiveness and promote feedback on ideas
- encourage both creative and critical thinking
- support collaborative exploration of problems and opportunities

- confront difficult issues while averting interpersonal conflict
- identify, explore, and develop promising ideas

You'll learn how an organization can experience a culture change through applying this process, and you'll have an opportunity to practice some skills and outline a design for a constructive debate that needs to occur in your organization.

In the following chapters, we'll explore the concept and practice of "constructive debate," and present ways that you can implement, facilitate, and support it. We'll examine how organizational culture and leadership behavior can affect individuals' willingness to take the risk of contributing unusual or creative ideas or to critique and improve suboptimal ideas before they are implemented. In today's difficult social and political climate, when opinions can often be tribal and differences can lead to unconstructive conflict, it's important to find ways to build robust ideas through a thoughtful, fair, and inclusive process. You can help that to happen.

PART ONE

WHERE ARE THE GOOD IDEAS?

The Need for Constructive Debate

