# Collaboration and Consensus

**By Bruce McTague**

**Part 1: Collaboration often crushes creativity under the weight of Consensus**



*"Then we are agreed nine to one that we will say our previous vote was unanimous!"*

Here is the thought: ***Collaboration and Consensus often generate a generalist idea.***

In the end the consensus ideas may be appealing to the masses (and therefore the group in general) but lack the distinctness and "edges" that could differentiate it.

Okay. That said (before I start hearing the screams of anguish from everyone who advocates the power of collaboration). Hey. I am all for collaboration. I believe it uncovers well-rounded ideas and sometimes even creates that unique "wow" idea in discussion. But collaboration is like a bell curve.



THE BELL CURVE — JIM M. GOLDSTEIN · JMG-GALLERIES.COM

In the beginning, because collaboration doesn't come naturally to specialists (and it shouldn't because specialists are good at what they do because they are…well…specialized), you are at the bottom side of the bell curve. This time in collaboration is pretty nonproductive and there is

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(or should be) a lot of banging together of different disciplines and knowledge. That's okay. I call this stage "positive friction." Some pushing and shoving and jostling for ideas.

Somehow the collaborators learn to collaborate (typically there is some generalist who is better than others at figuring out how to not only get everyone to "play well together" but also figure out what pieces of the puzzle are most interesting and useful and get them placed on the table to discuss). And ideas start flowing and being discussed and debated.

From that point the collaborators are moving on up (to use a Jefferson's reference). You are aiming toward the top of the bell curve. And this is where the 'bigger' ideas flow. The ideas that are awesome and distinct and, frankly, almost undoable (for a variety of reasons). Unfortunately that is when you start heading back down the bell curve.

This is also where a great generalist stops themselves (maybe not everyone else but themselves) and captures ideas into two groups:

1. The non-doable ideas because of truly functional reasons. They were, and are, great ideas. Ideas that could put the company on the map (or keep them ahead of everyone else). They just cannot operationally be done at this time. Maybe you don't have the ingredient that can deliver the "wow" aspect. Or the factories are not capable of producing it. Or your service people just can't do it. Interestingly, these are the types of ideas a company needs. These are truly the innovation ideas that the company needs to assess and throw into a new products funnel or feasibility studies to see whether it is worth the investment to make the idea functionally "happenable" (not really a word but I liked typing it).

2. The non-doable ideas because of…well…politics or such. They are "too hard to implement." "Betsy (a svp) will hate the idea." "Well, it goes against policy." Crap like that. These are the great ideas that are gonna die as you move down the "consensus" side of the bell curve. Sadly many great ideas get killed off because of consensus.

Now that the collaborators are moving down the bell curve this is when creativity typically gets crushed. If you don't have that generalist (or a way to capture those great ideas) the group starts heading into Consensus Land (sometimes called the Bermuda Triangle of Ideas).
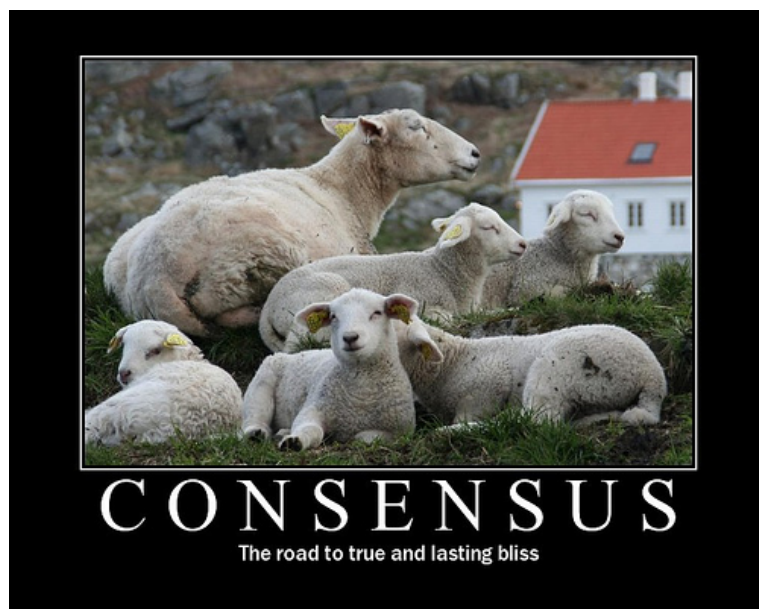
Consensus means "gray." Unless you have a truly unique leadership group (that have a meaningful system for agreeing to 'wild & crazy' ideas) as soon as the group gets involved you evolve to the middle. It is easy. Less objections and less obstacles to "getting it done." This whole consensus thing gets even worse when it gets driven down into the middle management level. So let's play this out. Senior leaders in their infinite wisdom want to empower the "little people" (ok. the people less senior) so they put a group of them together and say "bring me ideas your group supports." Uh oh. The group. The group who all want to be promoted. The group who doesn't want to look stupid. The group which may be made up of people with different bosses who have different agendas. The group that wants to look fiscally responsible. The group is now in trouble. The group will not select a bright color. Gray baby gray. Or something very very neutral that blends into the background of anyone who may have to approve it.

> ***"Nowadays it is the fashion to pretend that no single individual is ever responsible for a successful advertising campaign. This emphasis on "teamwork" is bunkum – a conspiracy of the mediocre majority."*** David Ogilvy

So go ahead and collaborate to your heart's content. You will be creative. Just avoid the last "C" (consensus). And maybe you will end up with the innovation your company needs.

To summarize. I believe in my heart of hearts the greatest ideas arise from individuals. And it takes a unique "individual" who is willing to share this idea and truly accept the grinding it takes to take a diamond in the rough to the Hope diamond. I also think it takes some unique individuals who love the true art of diamond grinding (they have to be a little selfless). If you can get the collaborators collaborating and not trying to come up with a consensus idea you have a fighting chance of getting "the diamond."


**Part 2: Being Unreasonable**

Here is the idea: *Great companies need at least one unreasonable person.*

So here is the key issue when you start talking about collaboration and inevitably consensus.

Collaboration can certainly lead to some great creativity. Consensus kills it. I heard a great line on the television show West Wing:

*"We are a country of centrists."*

Companies are exactly the same. In general, large organizations are groups of centrists. Why?

Companies are strewn with reasonable people. People whose main criterion is "making sense". They bludgeon you with the "why does it make sense?" club every chance they get. They are the sensible people that keep companies from fiscal irresponsibility and in general keep the company out of the ditch. (If I had a picture of every CFO I have met they would all go here). To them everything has to have a reason. It has to all make sense.

Working with the smartest of these people (and please don't believe because they are exceedingly reasonable that they are not often brilliant business people) means you are constantly running an escalating gauntlet of objections when you suggest a seemingly unreasonable (or nonsensible) idea.

> *"I've learned any fool can write a bad ad, but it takes a real genius to keep his hands off a good one."* Leo Burnett, American marketing expert

Each sensible objection begets another sensible objection. And it gets tiring (as well as the odds are in their favor they will ultimately get to the objection where you are forced to respond "because it feels like the right thing to do" – the kiss of death to the idea).

So if you always did what the reasonable people want you to do you will maintain your speed (sometimes you may go a little faster and sometimes a little slower) and you will drive right down the middle of the racetrack. Sure. You will never hit a wall or run off the track. But at some point someone will pass you (don't worry. Some of those guys have no clue what they are doing and will crash.) By the way, the crashers are probably a team strewn with unreasonable people who drive their reasonable few crazy. Unfortunately, some of those guys who pass you really do have their act together and most likely some unreasonable person figured out a way of getting people to endorse the 'unlikely.'

So here is where an unreasonable person helps. Sometimes their ideas make sense but aren't sensible.

> *"Reasonable people adapt themselves to the world. Unreasonable people attempt to adapt the world to themselves. All progress, therefore, depends on unreasonable people."* George Bernard Shaw

When I say an unreasonable person I am not talking about a visionary, although I believe a great company needs someone with a strong thread of visionarism (I made that word up) really near the top. Most of the time people think the unreasonable person's idea makes sense but seems unreasonable to get done. An unreasonable person can be a real pain the ass but if they are really good they bat around .400 (and remember Ted Williams was the last one to hit over .400 in 1941 so that is really good). This unreasonable person envisions/sees the idea that makes sense – has a good 'reason to be' – but also is willing to pound away on the unreasonable aspects of the idea, i.e., overcoming the gauntlet of "here is why it cannot be done."

Finally. Usually the last nail in the coffin when it comes to Consensus is getting everyone to accept the decision to go along with the unreasonable person's idea. Getting the reasonable people to wrap their arms with 100% support behind an unreasonable idea is very very difficult. (some people call this management alignment).
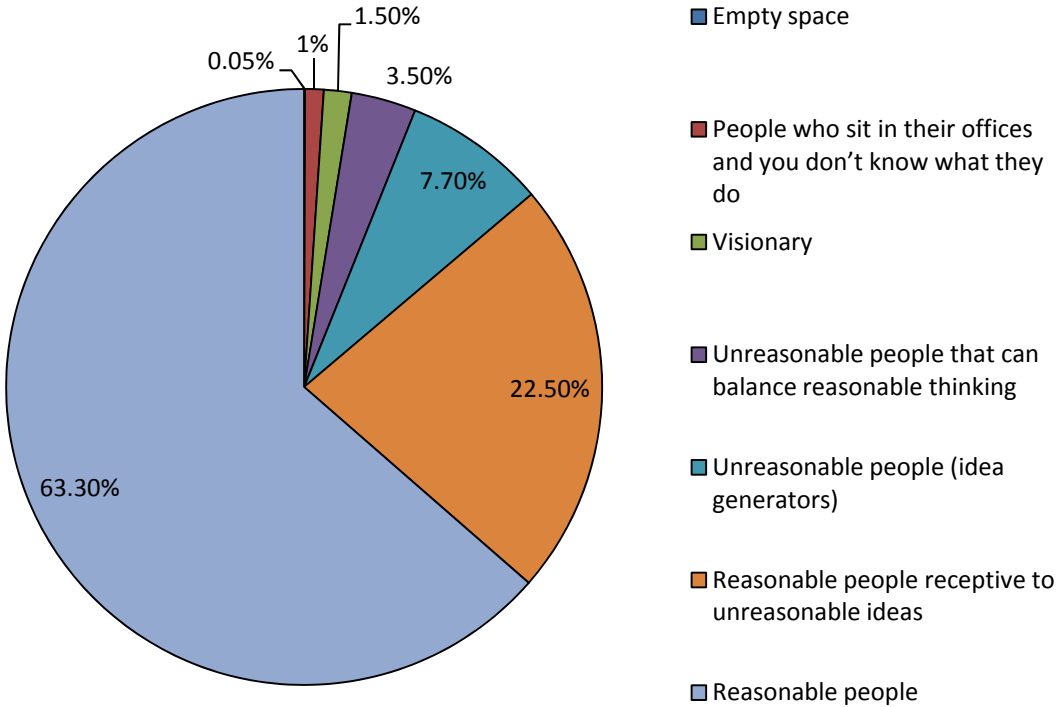
> *"In war as in life, it is often necessary when some cherished scheme has failed, to take up the best alternative open, and if so, it is folly not to work for it with all your might."* Winston Churchill

Anyway. That is an issue I cannot resolve in a paragraph or two (unless the leader of the organization simply plays their role as a leader and tells everyone to suck it up).

**Last thought on organizations and unreasonable and reasonable people:**

I will leave you with a visual. I tend to believe the optimal organizations have the appropriate mix of reasonable people (a lot), unreasonable people (fewer) and visionaries (very few).

# Types of People in an Organization



Legend:
- Empty space
- People who sit in their offices and you don't know what they do
- Visionary
- Unreasonable people that can balance reasonable thinking
- Unreasonable people (idea generators)
- Reasonable people receptive to unreasonable ideas
- Reasonable people

Pie slices: 0.05%, 1%, 1.50%, 3.50%, 7.70%, 22.50%, 63.30%

So good luck if you pursue collaboration and consensus and seek innovative creative ideas. And I hope you have some good unreasonable people sitting around somewhere.

**About Bruce McTague:**

*In a career spanning over 20 years, I've been involved with a wide range of industries including packaged goods, restaurant, pharmaceutical, retail, business-to-business and tourism. I won't bore you with all the details, but the bottom line is I have touched so many businesses across so many categories the headline for my career should probably be "Collector of experiences and knowledge."*

***If you would like some additional work experience details and see what a number of people have said about me, visit my LinkedIn Profile my blog, Enlightened Conflict or contact me directly by email at bruce@brucemctague.com.***