Moving Beyond Compromise

Why Stop There?

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to anyone who has been through the difficult process of making decisions in the context of a business setting, or for that matter any setting in which several people need to come to agreement on a course of action. That this process is often frustrating is to minimize the feelings we have all had many times when attempting to reach agreement on even trivial issues. Our hope is that the ideas and processes presented here will help others understand that decision-making does not have to be a painful experience.

Acknowledgements

The process of writing a book may seem to be solitary, even though several authors may be collaborating, but in reality it affects and involves many others. Family and friends are ignored and then drafted into reading the work, with the hoped-for result of a positive review and useful suggestions for improvements.

We want to give our heart-felt thanks to our wives, Juli Redson-Smith, Susan Bowling and Lauren McComb. They have put up with the multi-year process of creating this book with cheerful support and willingness to see us meet and spend the time we needed to write and then rewrite it. Not just that but also their reading and commenting on various drafts. In fact, we owe the title to Lauren and thank her for that service.

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How do three very different personalities manage to work together over a period of years, creating and discarding various ideas, premises, drafts and story lines, and still remain on speaking terms at the end of the process? In our case, the answer is a simple one: we actually

practice the very rules that we advocate here. These rules are based on the principle of consultation used in decision-making within the Bahá'í Faith, of which the authors are members. The Bahá'í approach has been used successfully by millions of its members for over a century and a half and has proven effective in a variety of local, regional, national and international settings and situations. While the Bahá'í Faith does not have a written set of rules as set forth here, the basic structure of our rules does conform with the principle of consultation.

This book is not an attempt to "sell" the Bahá'í Faith or any aspect of it. Our purpose here is simply to present an approach to decision-making and problem-solving that can result in workable solutions - hence the process name Solution-Building™ is used to provide a term that summarizes our intent. We believe that any group decision, whether in business, family, charitable organizations, politics or any other setting, can benefit from these principles.

Introduction

The process of making decisions is integral to life. We make decisions every day from what to have for breakfast to critical issues of life and business. When two or more people are involved in making those decisions, the process often involves "compromise" and can be complicated by the basic give-and-take and trade-off that is associated with that approach.

Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language defines compromise in this way:

1. A settlement in which each side gives up some demands or makes concessions

2. An adjustment of opposing principles, systems, etc. in which part of each is given up

3. The result of such an adjustment or settlement

4. Something midway between different things

5. A laying open to danger, suspicion or disrepute, as a *compromise* of one's good name, or; to surrender or give up (one's interest, principles, etc.)

Compromise necessarily, then, leads to a result that has the great risk of being suboptimal because the concessions made can easily preclude consideration of alternatives and important viewpoints. One of the factors those who promote compromise as a means of making decisions use as justification is that each side gives up something they want and thus each side can "live with" the result. In reality, neither side will give up something critically important to them while expecting the other to do just that. The end result often is that either no decision or agreement can be reached or one or both of the parties is unhappy with the result. Too frequently the ultimate result is failure because one or both parties do not fully support the agreement. This becomes more likely if one party feels it gave more than the other or had to give up something related to its principles or best interest.

In an increasingly complex world, compromise is not the best way to reach decisions. An approach that fully and objectively examines all points of view and ideas is needed to arrive at workable solutions to problems and issues as diverse as we see in the world today.

Anyone who has worked inside any company, large or small, knows that it is often very challenging to make decisions. Different personalities, diverse interactions, company politics, even social, political and economic philosophies present barriers to agreement. Add to that the basic competitive nature of human beings and the result can be a bubbling stew-pot of rancor, foxhole-digging, foot-dragging, backbiting, criticism, individual conflict and an attitude of an "I win, you lose" zero-sum game that leads to, at best, non-optimal decisions and at worst, paralysis and no decisions at all.

This description applies to virtually any type of organization, not just the corporate setting. It can be seen in organizations, non-profits, politics, families, churches, schools and any other setting in which a group of people, whether it be two or many, must meet and make decisions on any topic. All of us have seen the results of committee deliberations aimed at making decisions in a number of these seemingly different settings. Quite often, when we watch the process, we understand the saying that "A committee is a cul-de-sac down which ideas are lured and then quietly strangled."[1] The three authors have worked in a variety of different companies and non-corporate settings, including small local companies (less than 10 employees) to very large multinational corporations; they have been a part of boards of directors and trustees of non-profits, school and church groups, neighborhood organizations, and others. They have all had the (mis)fortune of serving on committees charged with making decisions ranging from purchasing equipment to basic corporate strategy for international product development. Some

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1. Sir Barnett Cocks (1907 - 1989), quote found at http://www.famousquotessite.com/ famous-quotes-17227-sir-barnett-cocks.html, accessed 10-22-09.

of these committees have been effective but most have not achieved the combined potential of their members. In many cases trouble began when one or more of the members let their personal agendas interfere with any sort of group discussion and consensus. Too often this was accompanied by clashes between individuals, mutual criticism, arguments, and backbiting. When decisions were finally reached and recommendations and plans prepared, part of the group undermined the decision by making it clear to those outside the committee that they did not support the results. This frequent behavior was often successful in sabotaging the work of the committee.

In other cases the committee or group was dominated by a single individual with strongly expressed opinions and ideas. This generally was because that person was the most senior of the group, was accustomed to making the decisions and expected them to simply be accepted. To this person the group was just a rubber-stamp validating his will.

In all of these cases, the probability of an effective decision being reached and then any associated plans or recommendations acted on with enthusiasm and dedication is not nearly as high as it should be. Human nature, for most of us, includes a desire to not only do a good job of any task we are given but also to have that effort respected and recognized. When we spend time in meetings arriving at decisions and making plans or recommendations only to see them either torpedoed, ignored or poorly acted upon, we naturally feel, at the very least, disappointed and in many cases, with continued rejections we become depressed and withdraw from participating.

We believe there is a better way, a way in which all participants will feel a part of the group and will then take a full role in it.

This better way is a process called "Solution-Building." In Solution-Building a group of individuals meets and agrees to a few simple rules to follow in their deliberations. The quality of

the result will rise and then the implementation will be more enthusiastically embraced. Our experience suggests that this will have a measurably positive influence on the company bottom line and on employee satisfaction, itself a factor that influences bottom line performance.

Those few simple rules, which we call the "Guiding Principles", are the subject of this volume. Rather than just presenting a list, we have chosen to illustrate them in the form of a fictional company that desperately needs to make decisions that will determine the survival of the organization, and by implication the livelihood of the employees who are called upon to make and then implement those decisions. As you read this story you will not only learn these Guiding Principles but will also meet some characters and personalities who will help introduce them and whom you have most likely met during your careers.

A few words about political correctness in this book:

Please do not take any of these characters as being representative of a professional group as a whole. All professions have a full range of personality types and temperaments amongst their membership.

For consistency's sake we refer to individuals generically as "he" and mean no slight to women thereby. Obviously, where gender is implied or specified, by name or some other means, the proper pronouns and other parts of speech are used.

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So now, the story of JayOGrafix, Lilly O'Hara and the need to survive.

Cast of Characters (in order of appearance)

Lilly O'Hara   Owner and CEO – JayOGrafix

Steve Parsons   "Time Traveler"

Mark McCoy   VP, HR

Jim Cavanaugh   Production Director

Allison Thorpe   VP, Sales

Jason Halloran   VP, R&D

Pat Garber   Assistant to Lilly

Kelly Hong   Section Head, R&D

Bob Hernandez   R&D Associate Director

Mara Parsons   Steve's wife

Ken Fujita   VP, Engineering

Stan Hadley   CIO

J. Bradley LaSalle   VP and General Counsel

Donna Lewis   CFO

Bill Matthews   Marketing Director

Chapter 1

Lilly O'Hara walked at a pace that allowed her to think about the morning. It had not gone well.

She had arrived at the company early to prepare for today's senior management meeting. As she sat down at her desk the phone started ringing. That led to the first of a round of frustrating sessions with people who wanted their way and only their way and were willing to be loud, rude, caustic, sarcastic, profane, aggressively contentious and uncompromising to get it. Then, at the senior management meeting later that morning, the behavior was worse than it had been for months.

The company, JayOGrafix, called JOG by customers and employees alike, was in serious trouble. Sales of their high-end video graphics equipment and related products had been falling for a year and recently had fallen even faster. Part of the reason was that their major competitor, Haze Systems, was rumored to have a new and very advanced product nearly ready for the market and potential customers were waiting to see that product. But another factor was that the founder of the company, JJ O'Hara, had died a few months ago. He had been the source of most of the company's advances and a charismatic leader who had held together a diverse group of highly intelligent and competitive scientists and engineers for years. His loss had been a blow to employee morale and they had been struggling since. This included the senior management team.

Today's meeting was to have concentrated on how to get the company out of the financial hole it found itself in with the death of JJ. Lilly, his only child and heir, had suddenly found herself the owner of the company. She had joined the company several years before, after

earning an advanced degree in electrical engineering and had become the COO two months before JJ died. That she had earned that position by virtue of not only her brilliance but also her knack for business had not led to ready acceptance of her leadership by other senior, long-time staff. They constantly challenged her. There were times when she just wanted to fire the entire bunch, or at least some of them. She recognized, though, that there was no time to find, or train, a new team with the knowledge and skills needed.

When you have several people in a room who only want their way, she thought, *nothing happens. And when nothing happens the company fails. Why can't they see that? Why won't they listen to each other? Why won't they look for the good points of other people's ideas instead of launching personal attacks? They're big in the brains department but their egos seem ten times as big! I wonder how Dad stood for it and how I can get them to sit down at the table without fighting and holding to their own agendas. I don't know how much longer we can last. How can I get them to look at the good things we are doing and focus on our future?*

These and other questions were in her mind as she arrived at The Corner Deli, a small place a couple of blocks from the company where she thought she would get a sandwich and a cup of coffee and calm down. No one from the company ever came here for lunch, as they preferred a fancier place that lay in the opposite direction. Here, she was hoping to have some alone time to think.

The Corner Deli looked like something from another era: glass coolers of drinks, sandwich fixings and sides, an antique wooden cash register, fans in the ceiling, wooden counters, tables and chairs. After ordering her lunch and telling the young woman behind the counter that she wanted to eat in, Lilly looked around in wonder, thinking she had never seen anything like this place. Then she realized even though it had a feeling of spaciousness there were only nine

tables of varying sizes and they were all full of people enjoying their lunches. *Oh*, she thought as she picked up her lunch, *the table back in the far corner is available*. She started toward it but noticed that it was not empty; there was a man sitting at one end. He was well dressed and looked to be in his mid-sixties. She hesitated and then decided she could sit at the other end.

She approached the table and, before setting her lunch down, paused for a moment and asked, "Do you mind if I sit at this end?"

"Not at all. I was planning to leave shortly, so please sit anywhere you like," he said with a friendly smile. Lilly noticed that he had what her father called "smile wrinkles" around his eyes, which were a bright, alert blue. She then noticed he was wearing a neatly pressed suit and thought he looked quite distinguished. "Thank you, sir." She sat.

And sat, staring at her sandwich and cup of coffee. The events of the morning came back to her in a rush and she suddenly went from hungry to having no appetite at all. Lilly shoved the plate into the middle of the table disgustedly and was ready to leave. For the first time since her father died she felt ready to cry, not from grief but frustration. She stared at the middle of the table thinking she could not give up, but had no idea what to do.

"Excuse me, I don't mean to intrude, but you seem quite troubled." It was the man at the end of the table. The look of concern on his face was so genuine that she suddenly felt this strange urge to unburden herself to him.

"Uh, I'm having a tough time at work today and am wondering what to do about it, that's all."

"Would you like to talk about it?"

"I thought you were leaving."

"I'm not in a hurry. I don't meet my wife for another hour or so." He smiled and Lilly thought perhaps if she just talked about it she may come up with some ideas that would help.

"By the way, I'm Steve, Steve Parsons," he said, standing and extending a hand.

"I'm Lilly O'Hara," she said, taking his hand in a firm grip. He took a seat in a chair closer to Lilly.

Then she told him her story. He looked very sympathetic as she talked about her father and his death and what effect it had on her and on the company.

When she told him about the behavior of her staff at multiple meetings over the past few weeks and especially this morning's session, he said, "Yes, I can see that's quite frustrating. This has been going on for weeks? They behave the same at each meeting? No one actually moves off their position?"

"Yes. Yes. And yes. Every meeting is like entering a time warp, we seem to go back to the same place each and every time."

"Do you think they really care for the future of the company?"

"Actually, I do. Most of them were with Dad from the beginning and I have known some of them since I was in grade school. Maybe that's part of the reason I can't get them to work together; they don't take me seriously. Maybe I need to fire these guys and work with someone new. Each of them thinks they have the only answer to our problems and they're not willing to even look at anything else. I didn't realize there was so much competition between them or that it could be so destructive. I have seen people I always thought were friends at each other's throats over this. Some of them can barely talk with each other anymore."

"Maybe you do need to fire some of them," said Steve, "and maybe not, but you already said you don't have time to get someone in who will work well with you and all the others. Perhaps you need to find a way to get them to work as a team."

"I just don't know what to do to get them to work together. They spend all their time poking holes in each other's ideas to the point that it is impossible to critically and objectively evaluate any of them."

"What if I told you there is a way? If they really want to solve the problem there's a collaborative approach to true consultation called Solution-Building. That, if your group will use it, will focus them entirely on coming up with the best solution to the problem. It can be used, actually, to solve any problem or issue."

"Them? Are you from another planet? This crew has a problem even being civil to each other around the water cooler."

"Has it always been that way? Was there ever a time when they got along and worked together?"

"Well, yes, they used to be a team, but now … I don't know, maybe they're just overstressed with all the problems we are having. Actually, they did clash a lot but Dad kept them in line. He had a strong personality and presence."

"Then," Steve said with a smile, "they can do it again but they need a new framework for working and making decisions that's different from what they have been using. One that is based on mutual respect, civility, openness to new ideas, a willingness to listen and learn, and most of all, taking their egos out of the equation."

"And you have something?" Her tone sounded skeptical.

"Possibly, but it requires a group of people willing to use that framework."

"Now I know you are from another planet. Even before Dad died they did not behave that way."

"Not from another planet, just a different way of looking at things. A way that things will be done in the future."

"So you are a time traveler?"

"Maybe a future thinker," Steve said with a wide smile. "Do you want to hear about this consultation approach?"

Lilly hesitated, thinking this was crazy. Then she realized that she had no other ideas so maybe this "time traveler" could spark something useful. "Does anyone use this 'consultation' or 'Solution-Building' approach, as you call it?"

"A few people do and, when used properly, the results are actually quite amazing."

"Okay," she said, smiling for the first time since the day began, "please tell me about it. I'll try to be open and willing to hear. How do we even start?"

"Good question, and oh, by the way, being open and willing to learn is the first step. Why don't you tell me what a typical meeting is like? Who attends, what they say, how they interact with each other, and how you deal with it."

Lilly thought that morning's meeting was a good place to start. After all, it seemed to have been just like every other meeting she had been in for the past several weeks.

"Our senior management meeting includes the heads of R&D, Engineering, Production, Marketing, HR, Finance, Legal, Sales and IT, along with me. Meetings normally start off with

everyone being polite to each other, in that tense way people will act when they are expecting things to get unpleasant. It always does, generally within the first five minutes. Most of the time it is the Marketing guy who complains about production, the R&D guy is unhappy with his budget, or the CFO harps about increasing costs, lack of revenue or money wasted. It has been so bad sometimes that I have ended the meetings early and literally ordered everyone from the room. People simply will not listen to each other and each person seems to have their own agenda to push. On top of that there is a lot of posturing, rancorous insults, dismissing of each other's ideas without consideration of any merits, and trying to verbally bully each other into agreement with them and them only. The egos just seem to clash rather than work together. I don't think we have had a productive meeting since Dad got really sick."

"Are there particular individuals who are more likely to engage in that behavior than others?"

"R&D, Marketing and Finance are the main ones but Production and Sales will get into it sometimes, as will Legal. The only ones who mostly stay out of it are the heads of Engineering, HR and IT. They have their own ideas but are quieter than the others. In some ways they are just as convinced they have the answers and will sometimes roadblock things, too."

Steve thought for a few seconds, then pulled out a pen, looked around, and pulled an unused napkin to him. As he wrote, he said, "It sounds to me like you have nine people in the room, besides yourself, who are playing only by their own rules. That is why the first rule of Solution-Building is:

Rule Number 1: Everyone plays by the same rules

"You see, unless everyone is abiding by the same principles they will never even agree to what the problem is, much less be willing to use any sort of rational approach to evaluating ideas and reaching a solution." Then he added, "Lilly, do you play any sports?"

Lilly was taken aback by the seemingly abrupt change in subject. "Well, I was on the softball team when I was an undergrad and I play tennis on weekends now. Why do you ask?"

Steve seemed to ignore the question and went on. "Softball is a good example. What would happen if one of the players on your team decided she should get four strikes instead of three, another that he should be allowed to walk after three balls, another that if he led off second base he could not be thrown out, or any other variation? If all the players played by different rules, rules that applied only to them, you could not play a game, any game, could you? It is the same in any sort of group activity and especially so when reaching important decisions in business or any other setting."

"I see how that could be problematic in softball, but how do I get my 'team' to even think about that? You are right. They are each using their own set of rules, rules that are just different enough to make things difficult for everyone else. I just don't have a clue how to approach it and even get one of them to consider anything else, much less the entire crew."

"Yes, that may not be easy. I can toss a couple of ideas at you and you can perhaps come up with others. One may be to call a meeting and not allow anyone to speak until you spell out the problem of different rules and agendas and then help the group understand the destructive nature of their current actions. That may or may not work with this group, but if it does, it saves time. Another idea could be to meet with each person alone and do the same thing. The advantage of this is that no one else is in the room to clash with and they may be willing to

listen. This is more time consuming but may be more successful. I am sure you can think of some other ideas as well."

Lilly thought a moment and then a memory came back to her from years ago. "I had a political science class as an undergrad where we were divided into two groups to debate a subject that was then current. It got quite heated and some of the participants said some pretty unpleasant things. At the beginning of the next class, after some of us hadn't spoken to each other for several days, the professor divided the class into the two groups again but informed us that we were to take the opposite stance and made it worth a significant portion of our grade if we did this seriously. I wonder if something like that would work."

"See, you are already getting good ideas!" Steve paused for a few seconds, then said, "Lilly, I can't emphasize the importance of this first rule too much. This first rule is really all about justice." Seeing the puzzled look on Lilly's face, he quickly went on. "Let me explain what I mean. I'm not talking about legal systems or TV police shows, I'm talking about the individual sense of justice that a person carries around inside, that sense of fairness, of equity and impartiality that allows a person to view problems – and solutions – with a mind that's clear and freed from the distractions of self-interest. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"I think so, but I'm not sure I've met a lot of people capable of being that fair-minded."

"Sure you have, Lilly. Let's go back to our softball analogy, if you'll humor me for a moment."

"Be my guest. I'm all ears."

Steve stroked his mustache a couple of times in a gesture Lilly had noticed him make before. He seemed to do this whenever he was carefully considering his words. His eyes also

wandered off into the distance momentarily before refocusing on hers. "Sometimes in baseball a player, even a very good hitter, may be called upon to lay down a bunt. If memory serves, this is called a *sacrifice*. And even though every instinct may be telling that player to swing away, he is willing, for a higher purpose, to do this. Why?"

"You're asking me? OK, well, maybe because his manager gave him the bunt sign?"

"Yes, but what else? Could it be that it's simply the correct move to make, the play with the best possible chance of a favorable outcome? It's late in the game and your team is down a run. There's nobody out and a runner on first. What do you do?"

"You try to advance the runner into scoring position. OK, I get it, but so what?"

Steve shook his head with just a hint of a smile on his face. "It's the same situation you're in: late in the game and your team is down a run. You need people, fair-minded people, who are willing to step up to the plate and do what's right for the team. People who aren't going to swing for the fences just because it will make them look good. People capable of sacrificing their own self-interests in pursuit of something greater. People capable of impartially assessing a situation and whole-heartedly supporting a sound decision. And when you have such a team, they will truly all be playing by the same rules. Think about it."

Steve darted a quick glance at his watch. "Oops, I need to meet my wife."

"Wait, you mean to tell me you are leaving? But this approach of yours, this Solution-Building approach surely it can't be just 'Everyone plays by the same rules.' There is more, isn't there? Can't we talk more?"

Steve looked at her. "Yes there is much more but I don't have time now. My wife and I have lunch here every Tuesday. If you really want to learn more, why don't you join us next week? We usually get here at about 12:30. Then you can tell us what success you have had."

I don't have time Tuesday, Lilly thought, *but this is helping.* "Okay, Steve, I will see you next week. Does your wife know about this idea as well?"

"Oh yes, she uses it a quite often and is better at it than I am. Here is how to contact me if you need to. See you then." He handed Lilly his business card, then turned and walked toward the front of the deli and out the door.

She looked at the card and saw:

Steve Parsons

Consultant

and a phone number.

Lilly sat staring at the door where her "time traveler" just left, wondering who this person was, and what this method was he was talking about. She was feeling confused, but strangely excited about learning more. She really wanted the company to do well and survive and felt that this approach might be something worth a try. She had always believed that things happen for a reason. Why did she come to this deli today, at this time? Why were there no other seats available and why was Steve there?

What he had said made sense to her but she did not see how just getting people to "play by the same rules" would do any good. What were the rules? How did you go about getting this dysfunctional group of egotists to agree to "rules" that were not their own? *I need an ally*, she realized, *someone who will both agree and work with me. But first, maybe I should do a bit of searching. What did Steve call it? Consultation, or was it collaborative Solution-Building?*

Maybe there is some information on the Internet I can use to see if this is in any way real or if he is just spinning fantasy.

Then Lilly walked out the door, with her mostly uneaten lunch in hand, feeling that she wanted to find out if anything she just heard could help. She also found herself wondering if she should meet Steve and his wife on Tuesday to see if they had more to say that was useful. She was not certain she should spend her time with them at all, but told herself to keep an open mind. She walked briskly back to the office.