

Procedure for "Coercing" Agreement

By IRVING J. LEE



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Vol. 32, No. 1

ARTICLES

- The Cultural Crisis of Our Age
Reinhold Niebuhr 33
- Procedure for "Coercing" Agreement
Irving J. Lee 39
- Man-Hunt for Top Executives
Robert N. McMurry 46
- Leadership Pattern in the Plant
Chris Argyris 63
- Foremen — Key to Worker Morale
Arthur N. Turner 76
- The Learning Curve as a Production Tool
Frank J. Andress 87
- Changes Inside the Pentagon
H. Struve Hensel 98
- Downtown Dilemma
John P. Alevizos and Allen E. Beckwith 109
- Measuring the Productivity of Capital
Joel Dean 120

FEATURES

- In This Issue: *Articles and Authors* 7
The Editors
- Thinking Ahead: *Why the Forecasters Disagree* 21
Charles A. Bliss
- Looking Around: *Books about Mexico* 135
John Fayerweather

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From *In This Issue*

Irving J. Lee

Is there any top executive in business today who has not had to wrestle with the problem of getting constructive action from a group of managers who are at odds with one another — without damaging relations among key members? In order to work out helpful answers to this problem, as in the case of other important business problems, two kinds of action are necessary: (1) careful research and observation; (2) formulation of possible ways to put the findings to use. Irving J. Lee's article, *Procedure for "Coercing" Agreement*, represents the second stage.

Mr. Lee's proposal, based upon his own extensive investigation as well as that of other well-known authorities, has already been tested successfully in one case. "Whether it is possible to impose this procedure on other groups with equal profit," the author says, "is a matter about which one can only guess" — but that it will in fact have wide usefulness seems like a good guess, judging by the realistic nature of the business situation where it was tried.

A well-known consultant to a number of leading companies and the author of *How to Talk with People* (New York, Harper & Brothers, 1952), Mr. Lee is Professor of Public Speaking, The School of Speech, Northwestern University. He is also a trustee of the Institute of General Semantics and a former president of the International Society for General Semantics.

How can the leader of a management group get policy and operating decisions on controversial issues without slighting the minority or damaging relations among the key executives?

Procedure for "Coercing" Agreement

By Irving J. Lee

This is a story; but aside from the fact that it employs fictional names, it is a real story. It relates the experiences of another man and myself as we tried to work out a procedure for "coercing" agreement — or, more specifically, an orderly way for producing agreement in a group at odds on some crucial question.

The Company

The John Marsin Company is a little-known industry operating almost imperceptibly in the midst of Chicago's North Side.

In 1938 Marsin's management was worrying about meeting the payroll. By 1949 the executives worried about ever catching up on the increasing backlog of orders. Their labor force had grown from 42 to 138. They now had two buildings. They fabricated small metal parts with enough efficiency to be absorbed in the expanding electronics industry. Relations with the metal workers' union were good. There were no more than the usual vexations connected with labor turnover, material shortages, and equipment breakdowns.

The company had grown so rapidly that the 17 members of the management group had an average service of but three years. Half of the men had been hired since 1946. The president of the company, John Marsin, Sr., had been an automobile mechanic in World War I and had started the company in the basement workshop of his home. John Marsin, Jr., had graduated from Northwestern as an electrical engineer and

by 1949 was in charge of all production. John Marsin, Sr., died suddenly in September 1949. John Marsin, Jr., then became president of the company.

My connection with this story began some years earlier in a required public speaking course in the Technological Institute of Northwestern University. John Marsin, Jr., was in the section assigned to me. He gave the required speeches, passed the final exam, and received, with no more charity than was customary, a grade of C. There is nothing in my record book to suggest anything but a routine performance.

The Problem

Then, four months after John Jr. became president, he invited me to lunch. I neither remembered nor recognized him. Nevertheless, he assured me immediately that he remembered the course very well and that he was grateful for the passing grade. He had been interested then in electronics, not eloquence. But now he had a problem: how to conduct the meetings of his management group. John Jr. had never done anything like that before, and he was sure that he was fumbling and wasting time. He had licked many problems of production in the shop; and, after all, wasn't this a sort of production problem? No pertinent course was available in the evening division, so we agreed that I should tutor him privately.

He was immediately the sort of student who makes a teacher look good. He read these books on the conduct of group meetings in the following three weeks:

1. Henry M. Busch, *Conference Methods in Industry* (New York, Harper & Brothers, 1949).

2. Harrison S. Elliott, *The Process of Group Thinking* (New York, Association Press, 1928).

3. Robert D. Leigh, *Group Leadership, With Modern Rules of Procedure* (New York, W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1936).

4. J. H. McBurney and K. Hance, *The Principles and Methods of Discussion* (New York, Harper & Brothers, 1939).

5. Alfred Dwight Sheffield, *Joining in Public Discussion* (New York, The Macmillan Company, 1922).

Rules of Order

One topic captured his imagination — “parliamentary procedure.” Here was something well-designed, organized, usable. He had never known that “rules of order” had been developed in such detail. Our sessions were devoted to an attempt to outline some of the elements — for example, how to introduce business, how to recognize a speaker, how to respect the opinion of the minority, how to postpone and close discussion, how to get a vote. He was enthusiastic because he had found a blueprint by which to control and encourage the progress of discussion. I attended two of his meetings, and we had two post-mortems on his handling of them. At this point I should have graded him A for effort and B— for skill.

Before the year was over, John Jr. was shrewd enough to see that he had gained much by the establishment of a design for his sessions. He had a feeling that he knew what he was doing. When I visited a meeting about ten months after our original luncheon, I noticed that he had put his production-mindedness to work on some of the time-taking procedures around motions. When a decision seemed made, he said, “Is there anybody who doesn’t see it or want it that way?” If there was silence, he said “We’ve voted, gentlemen; should we move on?” He was committed to the values of parliamentary rules, but he neither solemnized nor ritualized them.

Need for Agreement

Almost a year later, John Jr. invited me to a second luncheon. This time he had the sales manager and the production chief along. He began the discussion by saying: “I need some more books. Those you recommended before were just what I wanted. But now I want another set.” And for the next half-hour he talked about the effects of the fact that the John Marsin

Company was still growing. The management group now numbered 24, and the nonmanagement group 257. Orders were way up. “Do we expand to meet them, or do we stay where we are?” “Do we buy the building 8 miles west, or don’t we?” “Do we get into that new line or stay with the old lines?” (I hasten to say that these were not the questions I was to provide books for. I was to think about some rather lesser matters.) A free transcription of John Jr.’s conclusions would go something like this:

“We haven’t had a meeting in five months that didn’t bog down on some basic disagreement about the future plans of the company. Our sales manager here defends one view, our production chief another. We’re split right down the middle. I think we’re up against honest differences of opinion. We ought to be settling a number of little problems, but we don’t because we always get back to the big one. I have one question: How do you get agreement in a situation like this? Those ‘rules of order’ help us get the problems up for consideration, but they don’t contribute a thing to getting the problems solved. Who knows anything about that? Give me another list of books.”

I provided the following titles:

1. Chester I. Barnard, *The Functions of the Executive* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1940).

2. Stuart Chase, *Men at Work* (New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1945).

3. Alexander Leighton, *Human Relations in a Changing World* (New York, E. P. Dutton & Company, 1949).

4. Paul Pigors, *Effective Communication in Industry* (New York, National Association of Manufacturers, 1949).

5. F. J. Roethlisberger, *Management and Morale* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1941).

6. Ordway Tead, *The Art of Leadership* (New York, McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1945).

7. George S. Walpole, *Management and Men: A Study of the Theory and Practice of Joint Consultation on All Levels* (Toronto, Clarke, Irwin and Company, Ltd., 1945).

Some time later John Jr. phoned to say that all this was interesting stuff, that he had learned some things, that he’d found one or two useful items — but I really had missed the boat this time. The books were too vague and theoretical. He wanted a blueprint, some organized pattern of approach, something like “those rules of order,” but directed this time to settling disagreements efficiently and agreeably.

I found several other items including some theorizing about "universal agreement" that Alfred Korzybski had written in one of his earliest essays, *Time-Binding: The General Theory* (New York, E. P. Dutton & Company, 1924), and continued in somewhat more explicit fashion in *Science and Sanity* (Lancaster, Pennsylvania, The Science Press, 1933). There were ten references in the index of the latter, but only four seemed relevant. I marked the pages; and the next time I met with John Jr., I explained what I thought they meant. We then set up our second tutoring arrangement for some elaboration of these notions in the framework of Korzybski's general semantics.

John Jr. was very clear on how he felt about Korzybski's theorizing. The bits he read seemed fragments of some unknown mosaic. He had no time for speculations. He was looking for some machinery which he could use. I must confess that his impatience goaded me into a rescrutiny of Korzybski's views. It is one thing to describe the conditions which lead to disagreement; it is quite another to organize the operations of a group so that those conditions are avoided. As I thought about it, it seemed to me that Korzybski was concerned only with the easier task.

Then — I cannot recall just how it came about except that it was after a somewhat unsatisfactory tutoring session — this question was raised: If John Jr. liked nice ordered procedures, why not translate the general semantics advice into procedures which *must* be followed? In other words, if a group could be "coerced" into a pattern of making motions and voting, why couldn't it be "coerced" into a pattern of behavior so designed as to lessen the tension of disagreements?

It was on the basis of the hypothesis implied in that question that our procedure was built.

The Procedure

John Jr., as the chairman, was to proceed as usual until he sensed an *impasse*, a situation in which conflict was well marked. This was likely to be any period when the talking seemed to accentuate differences, when there was evidence that the vote would be close, when the minority view was well stated, when people were contradicting each other. At this point he was to announce that the chair was raising a *Question of Privilege for the Group* and until further notice all talking which expressed any difference of

opinion would be out of order. The chairman then would give the floor to any proponent of the view that aroused the controversy, who would be invited to state or restate the position without interruption. No counterstatement, denial, or refutation was to be permitted. The opposition's role was to be limited to the asking of just three kinds of questions, which we stated as set forth below.

Permitted Questions

(1) The opposition may ask *Questions for Clarification*. Questions of this variety are permitted: "What did you mean when you said . . . ?" "Did you say . . . ?" "What exactly is your procedure again?" "You said . . . ; did you mean this . . . ?"

This process is supposed to forestall the impulse to disagreement until after there is an effort at understanding. Since listeners occasionally project private interpretations which turn out to be misinterpretations, this clarifying period may lead to some self-corrections. Further, this is an effort to force listeners to the realization that what is important is what the speaker means, not what a listener might assume he means. It is also a way of emphasizing the belief that a proponent is entitled to every consideration in making his position clear, and that it will not be argued down before it is adequately stated. If listeners can be encouraged to wonder about what speakers mean, that may open rather than freeze the disputed position.

Here Korzybski's analysis of a "semantically disturbed man" served us as a doctrinal starting point:

"When he hears something that he does not like, he does not ask 'what do you mean?', but, under the semantic pressure of identification, he ascribes his own meanings to the other fellow's words. For him, words 'are' 'emotionally' overloaded, objectified semantic fetishes, even as to the primitive man who believed in the 'magic of words'. Upon hearing anything strange, his semantic reaction is undelayed and may appear as, 'I disagree with you', or 'I don't believe you'. There is no reason to be dramatic about any unwelcome statement. One needs definitions and interpretations of such statements, which probably are correct from the speaker's point of view, if we grant him his informations, his undefined terms, the structure of his language and premises which build up his semantic reactions."¹

¹ Alfred Korzybski, *Science and Sanity*, p. 418.

(2) The opposition may not introduce any differing judgments or conclusions based on previous experiences during the period of the *Chairman's Privilege*. Listeners may, however, request *Information Concerning the Uniqueness of Particular Characteristics of the Condition or Proposal* under consideration.

It is assumed that a factor in disagreements is the possibility that both parties may bring to the present problem views which were built on experiences in the past which may not apply to the peculiar, particular conditions of the present. It may not be possible for a person to divest himself of those preformed judgments as he looks at something which may be different, but the effort may lead to an uncovering of the *locus of disagreement*. If the locus of disagreement can be stated in terms of attitudes from the past rather than in the proposals of the present, that ought to be made manifest.²

Listeners may not argue wherein they differ. They may only request information on the case at hand in order to examine the specific, differentiating aspects. The model question is this: In what way is this different from other situations or proposals we have faced?

(3) The opposition may not present criticism of a speaker's inferences nor defend another set. But during the *Chairman's Privilege* period a listener may request information as to whether it is possible to check the speaker's inferences in any nonverbal way. That is, a listener may ask for *Information Concerning the Means of Investigating the Speaker's Assumptions or Predictions*. He may not argue the probability of what may be found.

This is intended to serve as a safeguard against prolonging arguments which might be settled by recourse to an operational solution. (Such a solution, of course, is not feasible when men are discussing purely theoretical matters. But in the confines of the John Marsin Company the percentage of situations which were amenable to some sort of check, pilot study, or small-sample test seemed strikingly large.) It is also a tactic designed to move the talk from that wide-open arena in which agreement is readily lost.

We used Korzybski's rather primitive illustration as our paradigm:

"Let us recall that a noise or written sign, to become a symbol, must stand for *something*. Let us

² Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 444-445, for further analysis of the role of prior-held judgments in leading to disagreements on

imagine that you, my reader, and myself are engaged in an argument. Before us, on the table, lies something which we usually call a box of matches; you argue that there are matches in this box; I say that there are no matches in it. Our argument can be settled. We open the box and look, and both become convinced. It must be noticed that in our argument we used *words*, because they stood for something; so when we began to argue, the argument could be solved to our mutual satisfaction, since there was a *third* factor, the object, which corresponded to the symbol used, and this settled the dispute. A third factor was present, and agreement became possible. Let us take another example. Let us try to settle the problem: 'Is blah-blah a case of tra-tra?' Let us assume that you say 'yes' and that I say 'no'. Can we reach any agreement? It is a real tragedy, of which life is full, that such an argument cannot be solved at all. We used noises, not words. There was *no third* factor for which these noises stood as symbols, and so we could argue endlessly without any possibility of agreement. That the noises may have stood for some *semantic disturbance* is quite a different problem, and in such a case a psycho-pathologist should be consulted, but arguments should stop."³

In short, listeners may ask for some "third factor"; they may not have time to debate the inferential probabilities. The model question is this: Can you tell us of any way of testing your assumptions or predictions?

Put to Use

It is no part of this story-report to say or imply that there is any inherent significance in the exact form of the questions to be permitted to the opposition. These were simply items in Korzybski's statement of a "theory of agreement," which John Jr. had been exposed to.

The important thing is that, once the above statements had been made, we had something John Jr. could put to use. After tutoring sessions he was satisfied that he, at least, knew what he had to do. Copies of the above inquiry patterns were distributed to each member of the management group, and John Jr. spent a good part of one meeting explaining them. I attended that meeting and observed that the men received the instructions without marked response. I could not tell whether they merely went along or whether they were going to resist.

What happened? I am limited to certain impressions and conclusions. They have only the

"present" circumstances.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 81-82.

reliability which accrues to the fact that John Jr. and I agree on them.

The Results

This Procedure for Agreement was tried out under what appeared to be favorable conditions. The chairman wanted it to work, and the group was accustomed to "procedures." Nevertheless, according to John Jr. it was not until after he had invoked the *Chairman's Privilege* the fourth or fifth time that he thought they understood what was involved. (On the third occasion, for instance, there were expressions that "this stuff was taking too much time.") Even after that they argued and they made counterstatements which he had to rule out of order.

Group acceptance and use of the procedure became marked after a rather defensive use of the "third factor" by the sales manager who had been asked whether he could "show something." He asked for time to run a survey which dramatically revealed that his prediction was in error and that his challengers were correct. From that point on the group seemed persuaded that they had found a way of settling at least one kind of disagreement. In any event, there were no more overt indications of disapproval.

Importance of Time

When John Jr. was still feeling his way in the use of the procedure, he never minded the time it took. He wanted to get "agreement in the group," as he said, "even if it took all day." Before long he began to notice that it did take time. Once, indeed, the statement and questioning on a single issue took the whole of an afternoon. Was this expenditure of time worth while? Only John Jr. could answer that; this is what he said:

"When my insides acted up, I was out for a week. I should have been at my desk, but after the treatment I felt better. Maybe a disagreement is a sickness. If so, we'd better give it whatever treatment we have."

I should support that view. A basic disagreement in a group is a kind of emergency which, unless corrected, can influence other decisions and operations. Friction breeds friction. Time spent smoking things out now may mean time saved later. This is a conclusion not readily verified by time and motion studies, but it does seem to be a hypothesis worth testing. During

the testing, at least, one can justify the time spent. Should our experience ever be at variance with the theory, it will be easy enough to do things differently.

Discipline of Questioning

The most immediately apparent value of the procedure was the recognition by some group members that anyone who had an idea could get a hearing and the opposition could not get going until *after* it had undergone the discipline of asking questions. We did not see this recognition in anything overt in the group. We assumed it from the behavior of some individuals. The head of the purchasing department, for example, invariably voted with the expansionist group, but he had never before initiated a proposal in a meeting. Now he suggested a radical revision in his operations; and it was approved, after he was subjected to a half-hour of rapid-fire inquiry, even though other departments were directly affected by his proposed changes. He told John Jr., "I never felt like giving the plan before because I thought they'd chew it to pieces before I ever got started."

That occasionally a pet project might be withdrawn without loss of "face" by the man who fathered it, after it had been given questioning scrutiny, was indicated by an experience involving the production chief. He wanted to build an addition to the main shop. The disagreement centered on the wisdom of "building it now or later." Searching questions on his assumptions concerning future savings moved him to admit that somewhat less adequate facilities could be rented with construction deferred until the matter could be studied in more detail.

I cannot judge the wisdom of this decision; I wish to call attention to but one element in the situation: the production chief seemed to give up his pet project willingly. Perhaps his original desire was the right one, but the agreement which came out of the discussion established a mood in the whole group that was certainly different from the earlier evidences of strain and dissension.

It is only fair to say that though we have other similar examples of agreement achieved out of disagreement, it would be much too extravagant to attribute them solely to the adoption of the procedure. One of the unsolved riddles in clinical methodology involves the determination of effects without the use of control groups. Some patients get better without taking any medicine.

We are content with this: if dissolution of any impasse follows invoking the *Chairman's Privilege*, we will assume that the procedure was worth while, even though we cannot be sure of the reason why. And we may even begin to study the occasions when the procedure fails.

Reduction of Tension

This experience with Korzybski's concepts suggests that following his advice does not coerce agreement as much as provide a setting in which the process is encouraged. We had anticipated tension in the opposition members who were not able to refute or reply. We found it, but we saw many indications that some of it was being released and rechanneled into efforts involving inquiry rather than dissent.

What this means may be explained by the notion of a *contest*. When someone says "yes," the impulse to say "no" may be generated just as readily as the impulse to go along. In the earlier meetings of the John Marsin Company that I attended, I was impressed with the freedom with which the members expressed dissent. A motion seemed to be an invitation to combat. I did not see this as a wholly unhealthy state of affairs, on the ground that it is better to release than repress what is felt. Nevertheless, this way of doing things permitted — indeed it created — a situation in which members tried to "win" over others. This "let's see who will be the victor" mood was for me both the symptom and cause of the trouble.

The new procedure said, in effect, "Contests are not permitted." So we were prepared for all sorts of resistance. What would happen to the energy formerly available for arguments? Since talk was not outlawed but redirected, we think that much of that energy simply went into the questioning process. Some of the question sessions were tense ones, but the heat surrounding a request for an explanation of the uniqueness of what was being proposed did not begin to equal the amount that would have accompanied the flat denial of a statement. If what we saw was at all an accurate representation of what *was* happening (rather than what we wanted to happen), the procedure impelled the members to look a bit more at the issues than at each other. People were then fighting problems, not people.

Increased Cooperation

The procedure did seem to offer a formula by which the group could attack particular prob-

lems as they came up, especially when the group was at odds. It did not directly provide the means for the solution of the company's "big problem." Whatever the company does, it is involved in a gamble against an unknown future. But what is important is that an awareness of this fact now seems to be moving the differing factions in the management group to a realization that they must together reach an understanding of the company situation so that they can define and evaluate the risks.

It is doubtless possible to find a more subtle explanation for the increased cooperativeness which appeared in the group with the passage of time. I am, however, satisfied with the notion that the outlawing of the free-for-all habits of arguing and criticizing brought to the fore an elemental understanding of fair play. The procedure helped the members to realize that they had a part in every decision. "I will have a turn someday, so I don't have to feel that today's decision is the end of things for me," is the way that understanding might have been expressed. When each had appreciated that what John Jr. was doing was insurance against unfairness, one big reason for noncooperation was automatically dissolved.

An interesting side effect of this procedure appeared in connection with the sales manager's report on the particular needs of an important customer requiring basic changes in specifications on items considered of secondary importance by the production people. The sales manager, certain of resistance to his view that the items should be supplied, met with the production chief to see whether the objections could "somehow be worked out." That had not happened ever before.

The Implications

Whether it is possible to impose this procedure on other groups with equal profit is a matter about which one can only guess. But one assumption seems justified. Remember that the John Marsin Company group — although not exactly a fair test case since everything seemed to favor the use of means for improving efficiency — was, nevertheless, in quite a state of disharmony. Hence it is reasonable to conclude that, if something could be accomplished there, similar effects might be expected elsewhere.

These effects will not come inevitably and easily by the mere posting of a set of rules. Our

experience does not encourage the view that a group will automatically go along with the sort of discipline here proposed; the members must be patiently prepared and instructed. The greatest single source of strength in this one situation was John Jr.'s willingness to take the time and effort to study for himself and explain to the others what was involved. A chairman less interested in stimulating rapport in the whole group would be satisfied with taking votes and letting the majority prevail. This sense of respect for the minority was the prime motivation. Without it there would have been no feeling of need for corrective measures.

With this in mind, the following caveats and suggestions are offered for those interested in "coercing" a group to agreement:

(1) A group should devote at least one or two meetings to consideration of the procedure. Each member should have a copy of the rules, and the chairman ought to read them aloud and explain exactly how he and they should interpret them.

(2) The chairman should be as specific as possible in his explanation of why the procedure is to be tried and what it is intended to do.

(3) The chairman must not invoke the procedure on small matters. It is to be considered an emergency measure to be saved for an impasse which is sharp and deep.

(4) The chairman ought not to compromise the purpose by permitting some argument and refutation in the impasse situation. Our feeling is that a strong ruling that this type of comment is out

of order is extremely desirable in the early stages of the use of the procedure.

(5) If agreement does not emerge from disagreement right away, that should not be interpreted as a weakness of the basic strategy. Perhaps the group needs more experience with it before the members see its usefulness.

(6) The chairman must be prepared to face up to his own desire to move the meeting along, to get some kind of decision quickly. Can the other members of the group be expected to wait for the effects of the clarifying process unless he is willing to do so too? I am sure that, if John Jr. had continued to feel uncomfortable, the procedure would never have had a chance.

Above all, before an executive decides to try out this procedure, he ought to have a discussion with himself about some of his own values. Does he believe that the wisdom of the whole group must be reflected in important decisions; or is the wisdom of a numerically large segment enough? Does he believe that it makes no difference how the minority feels? Or does he believe that those who are outvoted will surely go along anyway? Is he willing to consider the short-term desirability of getting business out of the way in relation to the long-range effects of harmony in the group?

Unless he concludes that the expenditure of effort in the quest for the larger values is worth while, he would be well advised to give short consideration to any means whereby the immediate values are to be displaced.

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