

## The POSITIONAL DEBATE:

What's this about?



### The Challenge

- Individuals become passionately attached to an opinion, then argue emotionally to prove another person wrong.
- People talk over each other, not hearing each other's ideas.
- Individuals get overly emotional and escalate slight differences of opinion until they become battles over principles.
- Some groups have developed an entrenched pattern of splitting into polarized factions as soon as a topic is placed on the table.

### What's Really Going On

- Instead of starting with the overall situation and brainstorming ideas, the conversation starts with solutions advocated by individuals.
- People are so engrossed in their own ideas, they aren't really listening to or understanding anyone else's point of view.
- Group members may be unaware of this nonproductive habits.
- The group lacks norms for dealing with emotional arguing.
- Members may lack both interpersonal and group decision-making skills.



### Facilitator Pitfalls

- Allowing people to push their positions without offering a process that minimizes conflict and reduces polarity.
- Allowing people to talk over each other or become highly emotional.
  - Failing to provide support in developing group decision-making skills.
- Failing to make verbal interventions that reframe or redirect dysfunctional arguments.
- Saying tentative things like, "It would be nice if you'd listen to each other."

## Intervention Strategies

- Post specific questions that will help the group create a set of targeted norms for managing arguments:
  - What can we do at this meeting to make sure that people really listen to and understand each other's points?
  - What should we do if people start to get overly emotional?
  - What language is ok/not ok when discussing differences of opinion?
- Encourage effective behaviors by providing training in skills such as active listening and paraphrasing.
- Clarify your role at the start of a potentially argumentative session by asking: "If discussions become argumentative or overly heated during today's meeting, what is ok for me to say or do?"
- If possible, reframe a polarized argument as an issue or need; then use a structured problem-solving approach that gets people working together to analyze the situation and brainstorm joint solutions.
- If you can't avoid letting the group debate two solutions, use a structured approach like a "Criteria-Based Decision Grid" or a "Pros and Con's" approach. These methods will bring more objectivity and balance to the debate.
- Throughout the discussion, make firm and clear verbal interventions whenever ineffective arguing breaks out. Use the three-step verbal intervention model:
  - I'm **noticing** that people are speaking over each other.
  - I'm **concerned** you aren't hearing each other's ideas.
  - **From now on**, don't counter until you've summarized the other person's point.
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**TIP: Most of the dysfunctional behaviors that people exhibit in polarized discussions will disappear when you provide more structure and facilitative assertively.**

