Déjà vu All Over Again

"This is like déjà vu all over again."

- Yogi Berra

In the classic British science fiction series *Doctor Who*, there is a scene in which the Doctor is trapped in a time loop: the same events keep taking place over and over with no end in sight. Naturally, this being fiction, the Doctor quickly recognizes what's going on and figures out a way to break out of the loop. In real life, it's not quite so easy. Granted, actual time loops tend to be pretty rare; not so the feeling of being stuck in one.

Working with different businesses, I've sat in any number of meetings where the same issues are brought up again and again. No matter how often the issues are voted on, argued about, agreed or disagreed with, they keep coming back with the inevitability of Dracula rising from the grave. People will frequently comment that, "We discussed this last week, didn't we?" but to no avail. In one software company, the debate was over some user interface decisions; in another, it was over the best name for the project. In one particularly egregious situation, a meeting that had lasted for over two hours, someone had the temerity to point out to the assembled managers that they'd been recycling the same arguments for over an hour and a half and that during that time no one had said anything new. The response, from one of the managers present, was "That's called communication." The time loop continued unbroken for another couple of hours before

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everyone gave up in exhaustion and frustration. The meeting was like an episode of *Doctor Who* in one other way: instead of coming to a conclusion, it ended with a "To Be Continued…"

Why do the same issues keep coming up over and over again in meetings? Why is it that some things never get resolved while other issues that have apparently been resolved keep returning from the grave? Perhaps more to the point, what can be done about it?

Stephen R Balzac

Perhaps the most common reason the same issues keep coming up is that the overall goals and outcomes desired are unclear. As a result, everyone is actually discussing something different; they only think they are talking about the same topic. For example, in the user interface debate mentioned earlier, one person was concerned about designing an efficient interface, someone else was concerned about aesthetics, a third person about which items should be more or less prominent, and so forth. Although they all thought they knew what would be best for the customer, what no one had done was actually talk to the customers. The net result was that the team kept responding to the latest bug or rumor that floated by.

Another common problem is that a decision was made without

actually obtaining buy-in from most of the people present. Frequently, ideas are proposed one atop the next, until finally everyone jumps on one that looks like it will work. Ed Schein at MIT Sloan calls this the plop method: each idea plops to the floor, there to lie quietly until someone steps in it. Unfortunately, since none of these ideas were ever discussed, they return whenever the question comes up again or whenever the current solution appears to have a problem. It pays to stop and examine options, possibly exploring multiple possible solutions.

Frequently, groups will vote on a decision too soon. Voting has the benefit of being culturally normative in the United States as a way of reaching conclusions. That doesn't mean it's always the best way to go about it. In fact, premature voting can leave people feeling frustrated and angry that their ideas were not given a fair hearing. Instead of buying into the voted upon solution, they instead focus on winning the next vote or on undoing the current one.

In one rather dramatic, or at least frustrating, example, the board of directors of an organization voted on an issue. The results were announced. Immediately some directors complained that they hadn't understood the options clearly enough and insisted on changing their votes. The vote ended up being annulled.

Only when everyone feels they've been listened to, feels they have enough information, and is comfortable supporting the group's decision do you take a vote.

Before conducting a vote amongst differing options, therefore, it pays to take several steps:

1. Ask everyone if they feel that they've been given the opportunity to express their point of view. If anyone says no, invite them to speak and encourage everyone to pay attention.

2. Ask everyone if they feel that they've been heard. This is subtly different from point 1: you want to make sure that everyone feels that the group has heard their thoughts and given them fair consideration.

3. Ask everyone if they feel they have enough information to make a decision. If the answer is no, ask people what additional information they would need. You never know when someone will say, "Have we actually asked the customer?"

4. Ask everyone if they are comfortable supporting whichever option the group agrees upon. Again, if the answer is no, find out what they would need to be comfortable.

5. Only when everyone feels they've been listened to, feels they have enough information, and is comfortable supporting the group's decision do you take a vote.

This may seem like a lot of work; with practice, it can go fairly quickly. The time invested is more than paid for by not experiencing déjà vu all over again.

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