

## SEEKING DISSENTING VIEWS to Shape Successful Safety Decisions

By Shawn M. Galloway

Imagine trying to solve a puzzle. You may have your own ideas and opinions, represented by some of the puzzle pieces you possess. But what if you do not have all the pieces? What if others possess them?

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**These missing pieces** could provide valuable insights, challenge assumptions, and offer a different way of looking at the situation. Just as a puzzle is more satisfying and complete when all the pieces are in place, a decision is stronger and more well-rounded when all perspectives have been considered. Seeking dissenting views ensures that decision-makers have all the pieces they need to make informed and comprehensive decisions.

Decision-making is a part of solving a puzzle. It is also a critical process that can shape the success or failure of efforts to improve safety performance and occupational culture. When faced with difficult or complex decisions, many of which are to improve occupational safety sustainably, it is essential for leaders to seek out dissenting views. This article explores the importance of considering alternative perspectives through popular and lesser-known historical approaches and modern case study examples, highlighting the benefits and outcomes of embracing dissenting views in decision-making and offering steps for integrating this approach into decision-making processes.

### Historical Examples

#### The Devil's Advocate

The concept of the devil's advocate, also known as the promoter of the faith, originates from the Catholic Church's canonization process. It refers to the role of an official appointed to challenge and scrutinize the evidence and arguments presented in favor of a candidate for sainthood. While the term may sound ominous, its purpose is to ensure a rigorous and impartial evaluation of the candidate's life,

virtues and miracles. Formally established by Pope Sixtus V in the 16th century, the role of the devil's advocate was to provide a counterargument to the case for canonization, acting as a skeptic or doubter to prevent hasty or unwarranted declarations of sainthood (Burtzell, 1907).

The devil's advocate is tasked with raising objections and challenging the validity of the evidence. They present arguments against the candidate's canonization, seeking to ensure that the process is fair, transparent and based on solid evidence. By playing the role of a skeptic, the person in this role helps safeguard integrity of the canonization process and prevent the veneration of individuals who may not meet the criteria for sainthood.

The objections and arguments presented by the devil's advocate are not intended to undermine the candidate's reputation or dismiss their holiness. Instead, they aim to ensure that the Catholic Church thoroughly examines all aspects of the candidate's life and virtues before making a final decision. The devil's advocate is a voice of caution and skepticism, reminding everyone of the importance of prudence and discernment in canonization.

#### The Tenth Man Rule

The tenth man rule is based on the idea that when a group of people unanimously agrees on a particular course of action, it is the responsibility of one individual to take on the role of the "tenth man" and challenge the prevailing consensus; in short, if nine out of 10 people agree, then it falls to the tenth person to question the others (Woolley, 2021). This concept is understood to originate from the Israeli intelligence agency Mossad following the 1973 Yom Kippur War, when the intelligence community failed to anticipate the surprise attack by Egypt and Syria. As a result, Mossad implemented this rule to ensure that alternative perspectives and worst-case scenarios were considered in future decision-making.

The tenth man rule operates on the principle that consensus thinking can lead to complacency and a lack of critical analysis. By designating one person to challenge the prevailing opinion, the rule encourages healthy skepticism and forces the group to consider alternative viewpoints and potential risks. The role of the tenth man is not simply to oppose the majority for the sake of opposition, but rather to provide a counterbalance and ensure that all possibilities are thoroughly examined. The tenth man is tasked with thinking outside the box, questioning assumptions and presenting alternative scenarios that may have been overlooked.

## LEVERAGING DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES

- Promote psychological safety.** Create an environment where employees feel comfortable expressing dissenting views without fear of retribution.
- Structure for dissent.** Implement processes like assigning a devil's advocate or using the "tenth man" rule to ensure that diverse opinions are considered.
- Educate and train.** Teach employees and leaders the importance of critical thinking and how to respectfully challenge ideas.
- Facilitate open communication.** Establish accessible channels such as feedback mechanisms or team discussions to gather diverse viewpoints.
- Recognize contributions.** Reward individuals who provide constructive dissent, emphasizing the value of alternative perspectives.
- Evaluate and improve.** Regularly assess how dissenting views impact safety outcomes and refine processes to strengthen decision-making.

## The Delian League

The Delian League was formed as a defensive alliance against the Persian Empire in ancient Greece. The Athenians, who led the league, sought out dissenting views from member states during decision-making. This inclusive approach allowed for a more comprehensive assessment of strategies and policies, strengthening the league's unity and effectiveness.

## The Reformation

During the 16th century, the Protestant Reformation challenged the authority and practices of the Catholic Church. Reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin sought out views that dissented from the prevailing religious establishment, sparking debates and discussions that led to significant religious and societal changes.

## The Scientific Method

The scientific method, developed during the scientific revolution in the 16th and 17th centuries, is built on the principle of seeking out dissenting views. Scientists rigorously test hypotheses and theories, actively seeking evidence that challenges their ideas. This approach fosters critical thinking, encourages open debate and advances scientific knowledge.

## The Lincoln Cabinet

During the U.S. Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln intentionally assembled a diverse cabinet with members who held differing viewpoints and backgrounds. He encouraged open debate and discussion among his advisors, valuing their dissenting views. This approach allowed Lincoln to consider multiple perspectives and make more informed decisions during a critical period in U.S. history.

## Women's Suffrage

The movement supporting women's suffrage, or the right of women to vote, sought out dissenting views to challenge societal norms and advocate for change. Leaders such as Susan B. Anthony and Emmeline Pankhurst actively engaged in debates and discussions, presenting dissenting views to challenge the prevailing beliefs and attitudes toward women's suffrage.

## The Civil Rights Movement

During the mid-20th century, the civil rights movement in the U.S. sought to challenge racial segregation and discrimination. Leaders including Martin Luther King Jr. encouraged dissenting views and engaged in nonviolent protests and civil disobedience to challenge the status quo and advocate for equal rights.

## Modern Case Studies

### Space Shuttle *Challenger* Disaster

The Space Shuttle *Challenger* disaster that occurred in 1986 is a tragic example of the consequences of not seeking out dissenting views. Before the launch, NASA engineers expressed concerns about the ability of the shuttle's O-rings to withstand the cold temperatures present on launch day. However, these dissenting views were not given sufficient consideration, and the launch proceeded

as planned. Tragically, the O-rings failed, resulting in the loss of the shuttle and its crew. This case underscores the importance of actively seeking out dissenting views, especially when safety and critical decisions are at stake.

### Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill

The *Deepwater Horizon* oil rig explosion that occurred in 2010 resulted in one of the largest environmental disasters in history. An investigation found that dissenting views from workers on the rig about the safety of certain procedures were not given proper attention. The lack of open communication and failure to address concerns ultimately contributed to the disaster.

### Boeing 737 Max Incidents

After the tragic crashes of Boeing 737 Max airplanes and additional recent quality concerns, investigations revealed that dissenting views from engineers and safety experts within the company were not adequately considered. Company leaders failed to create a culture that encouraged open and honest discussions about safety concerns (U.S. House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, 2020). As a result, the company continues to face significant criticism, and work is still underway to turn the company culture around.

### Netflix's Shift to Streaming

In the early 2000s, Netflix faced a pivotal decision: whether to continue focusing on DVD rentals or shift towards streaming. Netflix CEO Reed Hastings recognized the potential of streaming but faced resistance from the company's leadership team. However, Hastings actively sought dissenting views and openly discussed them with his team (Hastings & Meyer, 2020). By considering alternative perspectives and challenging the status quo, Netflix ultimately made the bold decision to prioritize streaming. This move revolutionized the entertainment industry and propelled Netflix to become the dominant player in the streaming market.

### PepsiCo Expansion to Healthier Options

Former PepsiCo CEO Indra Nooyi encouraged a culture of diversity and inclusion within the company. She sought out dissenting views and encouraged employees to challenge the status quo (Teleperformance Group, 2024). This approach led to successful initiatives like the expansion of healthier product options and sustainability efforts.

### Turning Around Ford

Former Ford CEO Alan Mulally is credited with turning around the company during a challenging period. Actively seeking out dissenting views and creating a culture of open communication are among the main reasons Ford was able to overcome obstacles and make strategic decisions that led to profitability and regaining market share (Mulally & Kirkland, 2013).

## Importance of Dissenting Perspectives

Seeking out dissenting views when making complex and difficult decisions that affect the health and safety of the workforce is crucial. Considering dissenting perspectives yields several benefits, including:

A decision is stronger and more well-rounded when all perspectives have been considered.

•**Identifying blind spots.** When making decisions about occupational safety and business risk, it is essential to consider all potential risks and hazards. Seeking out dissenting views can uncover blind spots that may have been overlooked. Dissenting voices may raise concerns or offer alternative perspectives that shed light on potential risks others may not have considered.

•**Challenging assumptions.** When it comes to occupational safety and business risk, assumptions can be dangerous. Actively seeking dissenting views encourages critical thinking and ensures that assumptions are thoroughly examined and validated. This can lead to more accurate risk assessments and better safety measures.

•**Mitigating groupthink.** Groupthink occurs when individuals conform to a unanimous decision without critically evaluating alternatives. This can be particularly dangerous in the context of occupational safety and business risk, as it may lead to overlooking potential hazards or underestimating risks. Seeking dissenting views helps to challenge groupthink and encourages a more thorough examination of different possibilities.

•**Promoting a culture of psychological safety.** Actively seeking dissenting views demonstrates a commitment to creating a safe and secure work environment. It encourages employees to voice their concerns

and contribute to the decision-making process. This fosters a culture of safety where individuals feel empowered to speak up about potential risks and hazards, leading to a more proactive approach to safety.

•**Mitigating confirmation bias.** Confirmation bias is the tendency to favor information that confirms preexisting beliefs or opinions. When decision-makers only seek out information that supports their own views, they may overlook contradictory evidence or alternative viewpoints. Actively seeking dissenting views helps to challenge confirmation bias and encourages a more balanced and objective decision-making process.

•**Identifying weaknesses and risks.** By considering alternative perspectives, decision-makers can uncover potential flaws or unintended consequences that may have been overlooked. This allows for a more comprehensive assessment of the potential outcomes and helps to mitigate risks.

•**Fostering innovation and creativity.** When decision-makers are open to dissenting views, they create an environment where individuals feel comfortable expressing their unique perspectives and proposing innovative solutions. This can lead to breakthrough thinking and more creative problem-solving.



•**Building trust and engagement.** Actively seeking dissenting views demonstrates a commitment to inclusivity and open dialogue and respect for diverse opinions. This helps to build trust among team members and encourages a culture of psychological safety, where individuals feel comfortable expressing their dissenting views without fear of retribution. This, in turn, fosters greater engagement and collaboration within the decision-making process.

•**Strengthening decision justification.** When decision-makers consider dissenting views, they are better equipped to justify and defend their decisions. By actively engaging with alternative perspectives, decision-makers can anticipate and address potential objections or criticisms. This strengthens the decision-making process and enhances the credibility and legitimacy of the final decision.

By actively seeking dissenting views, organizations can create a culture that values diverse opinions, fosters collaboration and drives innovation. Moreover, seeking dissenting views helps decision-makers comply with regulations and standards, anticipate objections or criticisms, and make more informed and justified decisions. It also promotes a culture of psychological safety, where individuals feel comfortable expressing their dissenting views without fear of retribution.

## Steps to Seek Out Dissenting Views

To start seeking out dissenting views in decision-making and create a culture that embraces alternative perspectives, organizations can take the following steps:

•**Foster psychological safety.** Create an environment where individuals feel safe expressing dissenting views without fear of retribution or judgment. Encourage open dialogue, active listening and respect for diverse opinions.

•**Encourage a diverse and inclusive perspective.** Build a diverse team with individuals from different backgrounds, experiences and perspectives. Embrace diversity in all forms, including diversity of thought, to ensure that a wide range of viewpoints are represented.

•**Train and educate.** Provide training and education on the importance of dissenting views and critical thinking. Teach employees how to respectfully challenge ideas, ask probing questions and present alternative perspectives.

•**Lead by example.** Leaders should actively seek dissenting views and be willing to consider alternative perspectives. Encourage leaders to openly share their own doubts and invite dissenting opinions from their teams.

•**Create structured processes.** Implement structured decision-making processes that explicitly encourage the consideration of dissenting views. Assign designated individuals or teams to play the role of devil's advocate or challenge the prevailing consensus.

•**Establish clear communication channels.** Create channels for employees to express dissenting views, such as suggestion boxes, anonymous feedback mechanisms, or regular team meetings

dedicated to open discussions. Ensure that these channels are accessible and actively promoted.

•**Recognize and reward dissenting voices.** Acknowledge and appreciate individuals who express dissenting views. Recognize their courage and commitment to critical thinking. Reward constructive contributions that challenge the status quo and lead to better decision-making outcomes.

•**Evaluate decision-making outcomes.** Regularly evaluate decision-making outcomes to assess the impact of dissenting views. Analyze how alternative perspectives contributed to the decision-making process and the organization's overall success.

•**Encourage collaboration and debate.** Foster a culture of collaboration and healthy debate. Encourage employees to engage in respectful discussions, challenge each other's ideas and work together to find the best solutions.

•**Continuously improve.** Embrace a mindset of continuous improvement. Regularly review and refine decision-making processes to ensure that dissenting views are consistently sought out and valued.

By taking these steps, organizations can create a culture that values alternative perspectives. This cultural shift can lead to more robust decision-making, increased innovation and a stronger, more resilient organization.

## Conclusion

Never underestimate the strength of opposing opinions when it comes to making decisions. Throughout history, we have witnessed the immense positive impact of considering different viewpoints in government, religion and business. In a constantly evolving world facing intricate challenges, the power of dissenting views holds more significance than ever before. By embracing alternative perspectives, organizations can make more informed decisions, drive innovation and ensure long-term success. By including dissenting views, we can truly harness the power of diverse thinking and create a better and safer future for everyone. **PSJ**

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