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Pragm

**Governance And Decision Making –  
Individual Effectiveness In A Group  
Decision Making Environment**

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BoardWorks International

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## Content

- Introductions
- Principled decision making
- Recognising group norms that influence individual and group behaviour
- Dealing with conflict
- Asking good questions
- Planning difficult conversations
- Learning to 'dialogue'
- The importance of board leadership





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“It’s not rules and regulations. *It’s the way people work together.* The most pressing need is for boards to be strong, high functioning work-groups whose members trust and challenge each other and engage directly with senior managers on critical issues facing the organisation.”  
(Jeffrey Sonnenfeld)





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## **Governance is a collective decision making process**

- An individual board member only has one vote
- To be effective he/she must contribute information and ideas that are influential





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## **Discussion:**

1. From your experience, what are the characteristics of the most effective board members?
2. What are the characteristics of the least effective board members?





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## **Heighten awareness of board dynamics...a possible process** (after Margot Cairnes, *Boardrooms that Work*)

Identify unwritten rules or norms of behaviour  
Discuss which of these the board should adopt  
Agree list; pledge  
Set 'rules'





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## Principled Decision-making

- Separate the people from the problem
- Focus on interests, not positions
- Invent options for mutual gain
- Use agreed criteria, objective if possible

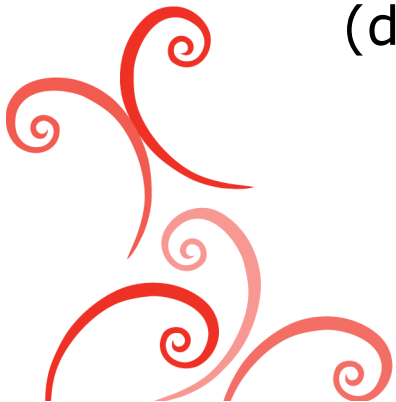




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## What's wrong with conflict?

- Nothing, provided it is channelled into constructive 'challenging' in the interests of better decision-making
- Board members need to feel comfortable with - even seek – conflict. For example, "mining for conflict" - actively seeking different points of view and testing them.
- Good governance level decision-making requires divergent thinking ('exploration') before, convergence (decision making). "Panning for gold".





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## Conflict - ctd

- However, conflict that is not managed well very easily degenerates into interpersonal squabbling. People feel they are under attack personally
- Discussion topic: what happens when you personally feel under threat?
- Challenges for individual members?
  - To exercise independence
  - To avoid passive-aggressive behaviour
  - To learn to "disagree without being disagreeable"
  - To be conscious of the 'ladder of inference'





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## **Conflict** – ctd.

- We each have self-generating beliefs which remain largely untested
- These beliefs are based on conclusions which are inferred from what we observe (and interpreted from our past experience)
- Our ability to achieve the results we truly desire is eroded by our feelings that:
  - Our beliefs are the truth
  - The truth is obvious
  - Our beliefs are based on real data
  - The data we select are the real data
- These are reflected in what organisational psychologist Chris Argyris calls the 'ladder of inference'





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## The ladder of inference

“A common mental pathway of increasing abstraction often leading to misguided beliefs”  
(Argyris)



John has no regard for the rest of us and what we are trying to achieve

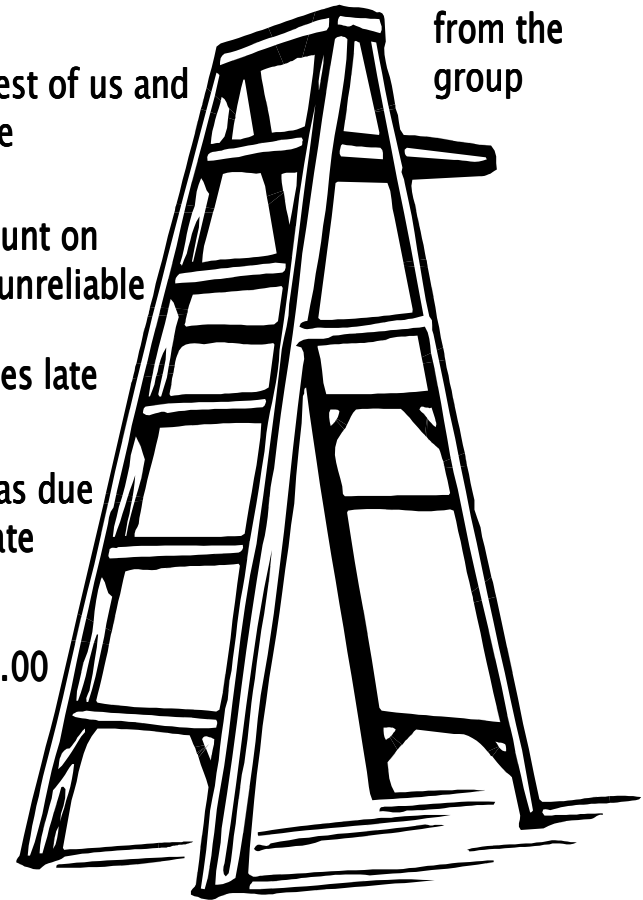
We can't count on John; he is unreliable

John always comes late

John knew when the meeting was due to start. He deliberately came late

The meeting was called for 9.00 am and John arrived at 9.30

We have to remove John from the group





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## Difficult conversations

- Recognise there are 3 separate components:
  - ‘What happened?’ (a conversation about the ‘facts’)
  - ‘How do I feel?’ (the emotional content)
  - ‘What does this say about me?’ (the identity impact)
- Plan, rehearse





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## Asking good questions

Developing a questioning climate

Asking the right questions

- Disempowering questions
- Empowering questions
- Examples?

Avoiding the 'judging' mindset

Encouraging the 'learning' mindset





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## Learn to conduct a 'dialogue'

At the core of every successful conversation lies the *free flow of meaning* and relevant information.

People:

- openly and honestly express their opinions, share their feelings, articulate their theories etc;
- willingly and capably share their views even when controversial or unpopular.

### **DEBATE:**

- Assumes there is a right answer
- Is combatative

### **DIALOGUE:**

- Assumes many people have pieces of the answer
- Is collaborative





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## **The role of the board 'leader' is critical**

'Boss' or 'servant leader'?

'Controller' or 'facilitator'?

Discuss the characteristics of a board chair who is most likely to enhance group and individual effectiveness

