UVa Center Helps Managers Work Together

By NICK RAVO
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Former President Lyndon Johnson was famous for urging dissenting colleagues to "come, let us reason together." But according to a University of Virginia professor, it takes more than just a Texas drawl to make two or more heads work better than one.

Successful group planning and negotiation requires a computer, the right atmosphere and some executive exotica like "idea management" and "consensus methodology," says John N. Warfield, director of UVa's Center for Interactive Management.

Christened in April as part of the School of Engineering, the $50,000, one-of-a-kind center has been nicknamed "Demosophia," a conjunction of the Greek words for "community" and "wisdom."

Warfield hopes to attract government officials and corporate executives to the center's "situation room."

With the aid of a computer, a 60-inch visual display screen, comfortable chairs and one of several scientific methods invented to motivate participants, Warfield said the process is designed to bypass many of the behavioral roadblocks that accompany group decision-making.

"People often come out of a meeting feeling frustrated, feeling that their time has not been well spent," said Dr. Alexander Christakis, the center's associate director.

But with idea management, "people feel they have learned something, that they contributed and that they have reached a consensus," he added. "This minimizes the frustration."

The key to idea management or consensus methodology is that all participants in a meeting must generate ideas which are then organized, usually with the aid of the computer. The ideas are then presented visually to the group in their organized form.

This "idea management" eases the burden of mentally processing all the information coming out of a meeting, Warfield said.

Other hindrances to group decision-making include disharmony among the participants, and a tendency for some individuals to dominate the discussion while others hesitate to contribute, Warfield added.

But with consensus methodology, a trained "facilitator" guides the meeting, keeping the discussion on track and ensuring that all members participate.

Warfield, a pioneer in idea management, said the process has been used both in the United States and abroad since the early 1970s.

Perhaps the best known example of the center's method is the "quality circle," a management tool created by Japanese corporations.

"In America, we put so much stress on individuality," Warfield said. "We say, 'don't copy. Be a lone wolf. Don't work together.' The Japanese are used to working in groups."

— John N. Warfield

Warfield cautioned that the center's process differs from the Japanese style of management. In Japan, different levels of employees from one company use quality circles, whereas only executives take part at the UVa center.

Warfield estimated that the process has a 95 percent success rate. He gave as an example the Kent, Ohio, city council, which turned to consensus methodology when faced with the task of cutting their budget by 20 percent.

Guided by a facilitator, each council member suggested areas where cuts could be made. The suggestions were processed by a computer, which produced a model in chart form showing the most desirable targets for budget cuts.

Working from this model, the council was able to break out of its usual "voting blocks" and reach an agreement on how to reduce spending by 20 percent.