Fostering friction to accelerate performance

Friction can lead to better outcomes. And the right type of friction can transform individual contributions into something far larger than the sum of the parts.

That’s because a group of people with conflicting perspectives has the power to envision a set of possibilities differently than any of the individuals alone, potentially leading to creation of new knowledge that could not have arisen elsewhere. Moreover, the right type of friction—defined as group members’ willingness and ability to challenge each other’s ideas and assumptions—can drive groups to reexamine assumptions, test constraints, and push boundaries. It can also force individual members to stretch their own thinking about the problem and how to approach it, in ways they would not likely get to on their own.

Creating that new knowledge, however, requires workgroup members to make full use of the group’s diversity and the external resources to which it is connected (also see “Accelerating performance one workgroup at a time,” CFO Insights, November 2017). And in this issue of CFO Insights, we will discuss the practice of cultivating friction and the deliberate steps CFOs and other leaders should consider to foster it.

The cultivate friction practice: What it is
Cultivating productive friction is about benefiting from the potential for learning that comes from diversity. In a diverse workgroup, members are influenced by a range of past experiences, apply different implicit rules, and notice different pieces of information. That cognitive diversity can create tensions within a workgroup, which can have unexpected and positive results.
Yet our desire for harmony can be so strong that productive friction simply will not happen without taking deliberate actions.

Those actions happen both within the workgroup, and outside. Practically, this means that members are open to being tested and questioned by others and willing and able to see how one idea fits with another and builds on other’s ideas. It also means that the group itself is open to challenges from the outside.

Other characteristics of a workgroup that cultivates friction include:

- **Energy over harmony.** Workgroups that go along to get along won’t get far in an environment that demands new approaches and rapid learning.

- **Challenge and discussion over approval.** In fact, if the workgroup’s output is similar to one of the inputs, there may be too little friction.

- **Transparent thinking.** Sketching a potential solution or even a list of assumptions on a whiteboard can be an invitation for challenges. Up the ante by putting the board in a public place and inviting outsiders to comment.

- **Thinking made tangible.** Just writing something on a board can reveal assumptions and relationships that aren’t apparent in a discussion. An idea becomes progressively more tangible, fresh aspects of the problem and potential solutions can be exposed, stirring up additional friction.

**Putting the practice into play**

Just setting up the conditions for friction is a start, but the type of productive friction that can help a workgroup learn faster isn’t likely to occur on its own. Being open to friction and maintaining a high level of friction generally takes a deliberate and conscious effort. Here’s how:

- **Embrace complexity**
  Performance improvement isn’t straightforward, in part because we don’t always know how to assess performance. Proxies such as focus, speed, and efficiency tend to favor stripping out complexity. But in a world of interconnected systems, the inputs, outputs, and conditions of each are constantly changing. A single approach or toolset won’t generally suffice across the range of conditions. In a complex world, it isn’t about how fast you get from break to shore, but about how well you ride the wave.

  Amid this complexity, workgroups can create tension when they resist the urge to immediately simplify. The perspective you hold, as an individual or a group, is never the only perspective. **Keep an open mind** to consider other angles and explore the nuances of a particular situation. Take time to consider, for example, that a refrigerator isn’t going into just a “house” but into a **kitchen** within a **duplex** in a shrinking **Midwestern city**. Does that change any assumptions? Abstracting a problem until it looks like something with which we are more familiar can seem like an efficient way to handle complexity; do it too early, however, and you risk losing the richness of the problem, which is where the opportunities are likely to be.

- **Celebrate diversity**
  by being explicit that cognitive diversity is not just a nice-to-have, but exactly what the workgroup needs. Be open about the fact that group members have different backgrounds and skills. Set the tone by provoking members to speak to their belief systems, their reasons for participating, and why the outcome matters to them. Resist the urge to resolve contradictions or emphasize commonality. Establishing a tolerance for unresolved tension can ease individuals’ fears that disagreement will damage the team dynamic.

  The goal should be to create disequilibrium in the group and evolve the options on the table, keeping the intensity high enough to motivate the group toward a creative next step, but not so high that it becomes unproductive. One way to do this is by **playing with possibilities**. A playful discussion of what-ifs can test the boundaries and conditions rather than treating them as realities. As communicator Nancy Duarte points out, the arc from what **could be** to what **is** creates useful tension.

  Ultimately, it may be as simple as being **curious**. A workgroup aiming to improve has an obligation to be curious. Ask the question when you don’t understand, and adopt a beginner’s mind-set. Reach beyond your experience and listen for what an idea could be rather than what it is.

- **Seek out challenges**
  It’s one thing to get options on the table, another to transform them into solutions. The goal of cultivating friction is the latter, getting to better solutions by learning as a group and embodying it in action. An alchemy of interactions makes a workgroup more than the sum of its parts. Individual ideas bump up against each other and against diverse perspectives, get tested in real conditions, and become
better as a result. This happens not once but repeatedly, as the context changes along with the group’s understanding. To create this alchemy, it isn’t enough for members to tolerate challenges—they should insist on challenges.

Sometimes, particularly when a group seems to gel quickly and develop instant camaraderie, the idea of doing anything to upset the balance can seem counterproductive. But a norm of not rocking the boat can solidify over time, making it less likely that a group member will risk a rift. Challenging early on, when the stakes might be lower, can help a group understand and adjust how it responds to uncomfortable situations.

**Challenge yourself and others** to break through any ego and hubris that can prevent individuals from engaging around what is most important—from unwillingness either to show vulnerability by asking questions or to be open to being questioned. Misunderstandings and disagreements can be fertile ground for creating something new. Individuals should strive to repress the desire to display authority or expertise—and shouldn’t let other members go unchallenged by virtue of their expertise. A workgroup, collectively, can help by not accepting serial monologues and by questioning assumptions as a matter of habit.

Even people who think they are open to new ideas often have deeply ingrained assumptions. Although it may feel awkward at first, here are some ways to elicit challenges:

- Try to bring more of the invisible and unstated—beliefs, experiences, expectations, and theories—into the open by asking others to state their core assumptions.
- Take the group into a new context temporarily, or bring outsiders in, to help heighten awareness of the group’s own orthodoxies—a key first step to reexamining and updating them.
- Prompt members who are likely to hold opposing perspectives and explore the disagreement. Rather than minimize the differences, try to explicate the “ladder of inference,” working backward from the expressed perspective to the beliefs, experiences, and assumptions that led there. Instead of, “How can you think that?,” ask, “How might you see the world such that this makes sense?”
- Call out the elephant in the room. Setting an expectation that the unspeakable may well be spoken is another way to break through complacency and elicit challenges.

Beyond a practice of challenging each other in discussion, another approach is to impose constraints as a means of forcing creativity. Imposing constraints on the tools and conditions of a solution is one way to do this. Constraining the budget, expertise, or (especially) timing can spark creativity and produce a sense of urgency.

Finally, try to create space so that friction can develop from a variety of sources. Silence can be an important tool and can provoke tension for some, while allowing space for other voices to clarify and emerge. Mediate the conversation to keep multiple interpretations alive so that additional important insights and slow-building approaches can have a chance to materialize.

Although action-oriented group members may become frustrated when passionate views collide and generate multiple interpretations of a challenge, these collisions and interactions could be necessary to reach new levels of performance. It takes practice, for both individuals and groups, to balance the need to diverge and generate heat with the directive to draw actionable insights. As a group’s members increasingly employ tensions and disagreements to reach better solutions, they can help create a virtuous cycle of more honest and forthcoming challenges.

**What the cultivating friction practice is not**

It can also be important to note what productive friction does not entail:

- **Brainstorming.** Too often groups use brainstorming to get “more” ideas on the table, and the means of doing this is to remove friction. Participants may be told to silence their skepticism and treat all ideas as equally valid, and at the end, everyone feels good about the number of ideas generated. But stifling any arguments carries a cost, as the potential learning from exploring the trade-offs and unstated assumptions behind the ideas is lost, as is the opportunity to candidly interrogate the ideas. Workgroups looking to accelerate performance should focus on better ideas, not more.

- **Playing devil’s advocate (or other roles).** If everyone knows that someone is playing a role for the sake of creating friction, they will likely treat it as a game. The quality of the friction generated would be low, because the challenge wouldn’t be grounded in a real perspective or deeply held belief. The goal should be to stir up and direct the real disagreements and divergence that exist, not to manufacture arguments.

*Excerpted from the “Moving from best to better and better” collection, January 2018, Deloitte Insights, Deloitte Development LLC.*
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Where friction intersects with other workgroup practices
In its new research—"Moving from best to better and better"—the Center for the Edge identifies nine key practices that help frontline workgroups accelerate performance improvement. Workgroups often need friction in all the activities to push the group to be better. Here is how friction intersects with those other practices:

• **Frame a powerful question.** The right question should create tension that provokes friction.

• **Commit to a shared outcome.** The group periodically challenges itself to ensure that it is still pursuing the highest-value outcome. The commitment to a meaningful outcome can help workgroups tolerate the discomfort of friction.

• **Maximize the potential for friction.** The productive friction a group cultivates can become more potent when it comes from a diverse and passionate membership. Members who are passionate about the outcome will likely challenge each other and themselves to learn how to have more of an impact, faster.

• **Seek new contexts.** Immersion in a new context can take members out of their comfort zone, challenging their assumptions and mental models in an immediate and tangible way. Changing context and experiencing a new and very different context can also help create awareness of orthodoxies and assumptions, and through exposure to others’ contexts, group members can cultivate a willingness to continuously reexamine, test, and update their own.

• **Eliminate unproductive friction.** When the group proves itself capable of managing friction productively, members will be more willing to engage with different perspectives or challenge as a group. It can create a virtuous cycle, wherein they see that friction is beneficial and more confidently bring forth their diversity in future interactions.

• **Reflect more to learn faster.** Challenging each other’s observations and interpretations of what happened in action, and what the results of the action were, is an important element of effective reflection that draws out learning.

• **Bias toward action.** To act with the most impact, workgroups need friction not just in coming up with ideas, but in planning action, taking action, and making sense of action.

• **Prioritize performance trajectory.** The metrics that matter to the outcome may provide a focal point for discussion and can ground disagreements in data.

Endnotes
6. We use “challenge” as both verb (to dispute, to question, to call someone to engage) and noun (a call to participate or engage, a call to prove or justify).

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