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Fill A Room With Barbarians

“I like it when ten people walk into the room with ten different opinions and are so passionate they’re yelling at each other.”

Dean Kamen, founder of DEKA Research & Development Corporation

In days of old, people would negotiate face to face. In mediations, people actually faced each other in the same room in a “joint session.” These days, most negotiations occur in the context of a mediation, with people strategically placed in separate caucus rooms, who may not see each other the whole day. Why do people prefer the separation? Because it’s safe. It avoids escalating emotions, angry accusations, posturing of parties and counsel, and confrontation in general.

However, in the business world, some wise decision-makers encourage filling a room with people with dissenting opinions who are so passionate they’re yelling at each other. Dean Kamen, whose company invented the Segway personal transporter and other innovative products, calls it filling a room with “barbarians.” Authors Bryn Zeckhauser and Aaron Sandoski interviewed Kamen for their book *“How the Wise Decide.”* To make tough business decisions, Kamen packs employees with diverse opinions into a room to vehemently argue their positions. It’s a highly charged atmosphere where everyone must be brutally candid, but personal attacks are not allowed. From that vigorous debate solutions emerge.

In appropriate cases, a joint session at mediation may help dissenting parties move beyond their emotions to reach a business decision. The authors reveal that a hearty debate provides two advantages: First, it forces the participants to expose their opinions to a wide range of counterarguments. The strengths and weaknesses of each opinion surface for all to see and think about as each viewpoint is tested against the strongest possible challenge. Second, diverse and well-founded arguments can reframe a problem so that everyone sees it in a new way. A unique solution can emerge that no one had considered before. An experienced mediator can prevent a vigorous debate from degenerating into unproductive chaos.

So the next time your mediator suggests a joint session, avoid the knee-jerk reaction to decline. Filling a room with barbarians may help you reach a civilized solution.