

FRICTION

INTERPERSONAL Respectful Friction

The Experiment: Institutionalize the Tenth Person

Duration: One month, applied to real decisions

Time required: 10–15 minutes per meeting where a significant decision is being made

Goal: Build structured dissent into how your team makes decisions.

Step One: The Setup

As a team, agree to adopt a rotating tenth person role for any meeting where a significant decision is being made. The role rotates so that no single person becomes the permanent skeptic, and so that every team member develops the muscle of structured dissent.

Before the next such meeting, name the tenth person for the session. Everyone in the room should know who holds the role and what it requires.

Step Two: The Role

The tenth person's job is not to be contrarian for its own sake, and not to torpedo decisions already well-reasoned. The role is to ensure that the group has genuinely examined the decision rather than arrived at it through the path of least resistance. The tenth asks:

- What are we not considering?
- What would have to be true for this to be a bad decision?
- Who is not in this room whose perspective we are missing?
- Are we agreeing because this is the best option, or because it is the most comfortable one?

The tenth person does not need to believe the counterargument. The role is to make the argument anyway, and to make it seriously, with evidence where possible, so the group is genuinely tested.

Step Three: The Debrief

After the decision is made, spend five minutes as a group reflecting on three questions:

- Did the tenth person surface anything we had not considered?

- Did the process change the decision, or strengthen our confidence in it?

- Was the friction respectful, and if not, why? What would have made it more so?

One interesting side effect of doing this well over time is that the team usually gets better at disagreeing without it feeling personal. When dissent is structurally expected, it stops being an act of disloyalty and becomes an act of care. The tenth person is the one making sure the wall gets built.