

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

How to Debate Ideas Productively at Work

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Not long ago, I gave a speech at a company that had been recently acquired and since gone from 300 employees to 1,400. Rapid changes are hard for any organization, but when I asked these leaders what their biggest challenge was they

didn't say "scaling our tech infrastructure" or "hiring good people fast enough" or "integrating with our parent company."

They were worried about how many damn fights their people were having. The company had "a culture of arguing," they said – starting at the top – and, given the group's ballooning size and new ownership, they were worried those patterns of behavior weren't sustainable or productive.

I told them that arguing could be a very good thing – perhaps the key to their success – if they could train people to do it in a healthy way.

Research tells us that cognitive diversity makes a group smarter. Two heads are, indeed, better than one, and many heads are even better, especially when everyone is willing to share their expertise and opinions.

Studies also show that most mergers and acquisitions don't fail because of conflict. They fail from the "organizational silence" that stems from the fear of conflict. This is the same reason that, if you're looking for signs that a romantic couple is about to split, "not talking" is a better leading indicator than "fighting a lot."

While diverse thinking and disagreements can be uncomfortable, they are more likely to lead partners or a team to make progress, innovate, and come up with breakthrough solutions than consensus and "nice" conversations in which people hold back what they think.

In theory this means that a group such as, say, the U.S. Congress, ought to be pretty good at solving problems. The hundred members of the U.S. Senate come from 50 different states and several generations and should thus have a variety of viewpoints. (Perhaps they still don't have enough variety, but we'll leave that discussion for another day.) And boy do they argue. But the way they argue is rife with intellectual dishonesty. And the "rules" that govern their debates, especially on television, are ineffective at encouraging *productive* debate.

Unfortunately, most of the rest of us fall into similar pitfalls. We get sucked into trying to "win" – so we look good or don't make the group we represent look bad – which leads us to ignore logic and evidence that go against our original beliefs. And so we fight without making much progress.

We can change this dynamic, moving toward more effective discourse (exchanging diverse ideas) and debate (arguing honestly for and against the merits of those ideas), by training people to adopt the right habits. Here's how:

Remember we're all on the same team. Just about all debates fall into one of three categories: The kind where the goal is to persuade people you're right; the kind where the goal is to look better than your opponent; and the kind where the goal is to find better solutions together. The third is the one that helps us get the most out of a group's cognitive diversity. To steer people in that direction, set the stage by kicking off the discussion with a shared goal, a spirit of inquiry, and emphasis that everyone is on the same team. Offer these reminders:

- We're here together in the spirit of inquiry, as comrades, not adversaries.
- Our shared goal is to find the best way to do [x].
- All viewpoints in service of this goal are welcome.

- There is no “winner.” The team wins if we make progress.
- Everyone is an equal participant; there is no hierarchy or special weight given to one person’s viewpoint over another’s.

Keep it about facts, logic, and the topic at hand. One of the most difficult – and crucial – elements of a productive debate is keeping it on one track. Arguments tend to fracture, especially when people feel like their ideas or identities are coming under attack. Unfortunately, when people feel strongly about their opinions, they tend to, often subconsciously, resort to logical fallacies, question dodging, bad facts, and outright deception. Or they bring in outside issues to bolster their points and distract people from counterarguments. It’s important for leaders (and participants) to be vigilant, so none of these bad behaviors sneak into debates. Tell people to follow these rules:

- The debate is not about who cares more, who’s loudest, who’s most powerful, or who’s most articulate.
- No tricky [rhetorical tactics](#).
- Distinguish between facts and interpretations (stories people have about the facts).
- Identify logical fallacies, and rewind.
- Check the validity of assertions of fact, and analyze the *quality* of the evidence, not just the evidence.
- If the debate veers into other topics, acknowledge it and reset.

Don’t make it personal. Arguments tend to fracture when people feel like their ideas or identities are coming under attack. Emotion and ego begin to play a much bigger role and everyone becomes less likely to appreciate others’ points of view,

which greatly reduces the potential for innovation or problem-solving. To ensure that debates don't get sidetracked in this way, we need to explicitly *depersonalize* our arguments. In other words:

- No name calling or personal attacks.
- Stay away from questions that cast judgment on people, rather than their ideas. Instead of questions like “how could you believe that?” or “why can't you see?”, pose “what” questions instead, such as “what makes you feel that way?” or “what has led you to that conclusion?”
- Give people the benefit of the doubt. Assume that everyone's intentions are good.
- Nobody loses face for changing their mind.
- Reward people for carrying the group forward, rather than being “right.”

Be intellectually humble. For a debate to truly be productive, participants need to be willing to respect every viewpoint and change their minds when necessary. This is what psychologists call intellectual humility, and it's one of the most important skills a good leader – and productive debater – can develop. This rule breaks down like so:

- Don't take things personally.
- Listen to and respect every person and their viewpoint, even if you disagree.
- Admit when you realize you're wrong, and cheerfully concede when others have good points.
- Be curious. Even bad ideas can be useful; they can help us find new and better ideas.

It’s important for everyone involved in a discourse – whether it’s a one-on-one over coffee or a public discussion in a board room – to exemplify these habits. But leaders (or whoever has the most power in the room) should be the first to hold themselves accountable to them.

The key to breakthrough problem solving isn’t getting along well. It’s not getting along – well.

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