

How to disagree positively and productively



Conflict is something most of us shy away from, whether in the workplace or elsewhere. But if approached with care and thought, disagreements can lead to productive outcomes that hopefully lead to a consensus being reached. Psychotherapist Diana Parkinson explains that we often feel threatened and frightened when someone disagrees with us.

“We become defensive, sometimes aggressive, frequently blaming our opposer,” she says. “It’s important to be able to talk calmly, without blaming or shaming one another.

“If we talk about having a difference of opinion rather than a disagreement, we immediately reduce feelings of stress and anger usually experienced with disagreement. Differences of opinion are normal and are to be valued as opportunities to work together to achieve a positive outcome that’s satisfactory for everyone.”

Former senior manager at McDonald’s and founder of her eponymous company, Marianne Page Limited, believes that disagreements can, in fact, create relationships in a team.

“This might sound backwards, but it’s by disagreeing, by questioning, and debating that we get to know our colleagues best,” she says. “Having a culture of openness and honesty, while still being respectful of another person’s right to a different opinion to yours is something we should all aspire to, both at work and at home.

“You’ll also notice that through lively debate you discover common ground, and this is often the basis for a compromise. We get pushed out of our comfort zones, and we may feel uncomfortable, but whatever good came from anything easy?”

Susy Roberts, founder of people development consultancy Hunter Roberts, believes that healthy conflict encourages better solutions and allows you to look at the pros and cons of a situation with different views, giving a wider picture and a more creative solution.

Jane Piper, organisational psychologist and author of *Focus in the Age of Distraction*, echoes this, saying that disagreements can often be a source of creative energy.

“People often have different ways of looking at an issue, which can generate tension but, if worked through positively, can result in a better solution,” says Piper. “If a team always agrees with each other, their solutions tend to be sub-optimal.”

Alex Efthymiades, co-founder of conflict management and mediation consultancy Consensio, stresses that if conflict is avoided, it can lead to making matters worse as they are left to fester.

“We need to adopt a different mindset when it comes to disagreements and conflict in general,” he notes. “Conflict is not good or bad. It simply is. Disagreements are part of all relationships. So, if you go into a conversation to ‘win’, you will have a less collaborative mindset than if you go into a conversation to ‘resolve’ a disagreement.

“One way to be constructive while disagreeing is to actually listen to what the other person is trying to say. Most of us don’t actually listen to what someone we are in disagreement with is saying. Our mindset is that we need to prove we are right and they are wrong, for example. But what we actually need to do is go into a conversation with the ability to being open to the reality that what they are saying will clarify things and will help us see things from their perspective. That doesn’t mean we need to agree, but it means that we can understand where the other person is coming from.”

Above all, it’s worth noting Page’s warning: “...if you don't ever disagree, you’ll fade into the background, disappear. Perhaps worse – be walked all over and actively disregarded.”

Here are six tips to help guide you through disagreements...

1) BE CONSTRUCTIVE

There are many ways to solve differences, so take some time to think of different approaches, be patient and conciliatory and remain assertive in your views, stresses Diana Parkinson. “Look for compromise; if appropriate praise the other side, because they are entitled to their view, just as you are to yours. At the end of the day you both need a satisfactory and positive solution.”

Remember to criticise the behaviour or performance and not the person, advises Jane Piper. Constructive criticism focuses on behaviour and gives the person an opportunity to use the specific feedback to improve their performance. Also, acknowledge the person’s point of view to show you’ve heard what they have said – even if you don’t agree with it.

2) USE A RELAXED TONE OF VOICE

Communications coach Robin Kermode believes that getting the right tone of voice is critical: “If you want to disagree with someone, explain your argument clearly but say it using a relaxed voice, with no hint of anger. I recommend my clients always take a couple of seconds before disagreeing. This two-second pause does several things: it gives you time to think, allowing you to breathe slowly so that you don’t respond too quickly, in anger; and it gives you time to phrase your answer and makes you look like you’re thinking deeply about it rather than simply responding with a knee-jerk reaction from your own prejudice.”

3) ASK YOURSELF QUESTIONS...

Marianne Page suggests asking yourself the following questions to help you be clear about the matter at hand:

- What do you disagree with? Describe it clearly, be articulate and detailed if necessary.
- How is it making you feel? Outline what effect it is having on you, the team, or your life.
- How can you solve this? Suggest a solution, or ask what the other person thinks so you can reach a compromise. They might not realise how they're making you feel, or they might not be able to see a solution.

4) BE HONEST AND APOLOGISE IF NECESSARY

Roberts says that people need to consider whether they may be at fault during the disagreement, accept it, move on and apologise if necessary. Learning to identify your own shortcomings and admit to them is the only way to turn a disagreement into a positive, she observes.

“Insisting you’re right about everything will stifle you and hold back growth, whether it’s professional or personal. The most successful people in business and relationships are those who accept that there will always be something to learn.”

5) MAKE PEACE IF POSSIBLE

Kermode recommends checking in with everyone at the end of a meeting about a disagreement – especially with those who feel they haven't been listened to enough if you've chosen to go a different route.

“Go around the table and let everyone speak without being interrupted,” he says. “As my grandmother said, ‘Never let the sun go down on your wrath. Always make peace before the end of the day.’ A night of seething resentment only builds and spills over into the next day.”

6) FIND AN ARBITRATOR

If people aren't willing to change positions, says Piper, a third person should intervene to help to find a compromise.

“If that doesn't work in a business setting, it is time for someone in senior position to force a compromise that maybe neither party likes, but are forced to accept,” she says.

If all fails, Diana Parkinson recommends both parties choose an arbitrator, accepting their decision as binding.