

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP

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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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Disagree Agreeably ▶ 04/08/10

Disagreeing disagreeably

Marshall, a television executive, was facing open rebellion from the writers he supervised. His president told me, "Marshall's the smartest guy here. No doubt about it. And his ideas are great, but he can't get anyone to hear them because he comes across like a sledgehammer. Creative people don't like to be talked to that way."

"Who does?" I replied.

Marshall was, indeed, very smart. When he heard other people's ideas, he knew in a heartbeat whether they would work or not. His standard style was to jump in with an impatient, "No!" and then explain why his idea was better.

The problem with disagreeing in this way (and it's how I hear many people express disagreement) is that your receivers hear a blunt message: "You're wrong!" They feel you've thrown down a gauntlet. Is it any surprise that people debate and argue defensively when they hear this style of disagreement?

Even if you add in phrases like, "You're not understanding me" or "That's not what I meant at all," I'll bet I would see your receivers flinch or disengage their eye contact or simply become silent if your basic style is to simply say "no."

Whether you mean to or not, that impatient "no" injects tension into the interchange. Resolution is not coming closer. This happened to me just the other day.

Disagreement reduces listening and rapport

I was having lunch with a guy who's like a brother. We share deep trust and mutual admiration. I was telling him the latest complications in a difficult relationship with someone we both know. After listening a long time, he began his reply with these words, "You and I aren't on the same page about this." He went on to talk at length about how he saw the situation.



While he was talking, I was aware of a subtle but growing sense of alarm. I felt hyper-alert, listening intently for his argument so I could rebut it. I didn't feel nearly as close to him as I had just a minute before.

When he finished, I was confused. I hadn't heard him state his disagreement. There was nothing to rebut. I asked him why he thought we weren't on the same page. He looked puzzled, then said, "I said we *are* on the same page." I'd misheard him.

Just *thinking* he was going to disagree with me had set me on edge. And this is someone I trust with my life!

Imagine the reactions you evoke in others when you disagree with them using your natural style, whatever that style is. When you disagree, do you create an atmosphere where people feel open and eager to listen to all the reasons why you disagree with them? Or are they ready to argue and debate and defend their position? Most likely the latter!

Disagreeing agreeably

One way to disagree and still keep people engaged is to acknowledge your difference in opinion without trying to change it. It sounds like this:

"My understanding is very different. I've always thought..."

"That's interesting. That's not how I think about it. My way of thinking is..."

"It's helpful to hear you explain it that way because I don't experience it that way at all. In my experience, I..."

Disagreeing in this way doesn't try to vaporize the other person's point of view. You side-step the trap of adopting the superior position of declaring the other person's idea "wrong." Consequently, your listener is less likely to feel attacked and is more likely to stay engaged.

As I taught Marshall these skills, he was skeptical. "These creative types are always defensive. To them, their scripts are like their babies, and I'm in the position of telling them their baby is ugly. Who's gonna welcome hearing that?"

After laughing at that analogy, I shared a technique for calming defensive reactions: stay in the role of listener longer. Show genuine interest in their idea, ask questions, allow them to explain their thinking.

Still the skeptic, Marshall asked, "Doesn't that just get 'em even more convinced how great their idea is?"



“Not in my experience,” I said, resisting the urge to hit him with a blunt “no.” “People appreciate getting a fair hearing.”

Listen longer before disagreeing

With a smile, I told him I do this in my coaching all the time. Sometimes when a client tells me a situation, I feel pretty certain right away that I have a tool to address the issue. But experience has taught me that clients can't embrace tools if they're offered too soon. I have to earn the right to offer help by first showing genuine interest in the client's specific situation. If I offer help too soon, it may appear I think the client's situation is predictable and not at all special. Who wants to feel like that about their situation?

“Sounds pretty manipulative to me,” Marshall said.

“Intentional, yes,” I agreed, once again avoiding the “no.” “But to me, manipulation is when I deceive you into thinking that what you're doing is for your own good when I mean it to be to your detriment. Manipulation, to me, means tilting the playing field so my advantage goes up and yours goes down.

“If I listen to you longer so that you'll be able to hear my tool when I offer it up, I don't think I gain any advantage. We both win.” I said.

He acknowledged my point. Then he said, “Do you know the problem with this way of disagreeing? It makes it sound like I think their idea is good. But I don't. I don't want them to think I approve of their idea. I need them to get on board with *my* idea.”

“Well, to me, Marshall, acknowledging that their idea has value is quite different from agreeing with it. And, since you're the boss, they'll have get on board with your idea eventually. But I think what they're protesting against is that your way of disagreeing makes them feel their idea has no value at all. No one wants to feel dismissed or discounted.”

Steps to lessen resistance

Over time, as he practiced these techniques at home with his wife and children, and then at work with his writers, he found he experienced much less resistance.



Disagreeing agreeably requires two behaviors up front, and one more as a refinement. The two required behaviors:

- 1 Acknowledge the other person's idea is valid
- 2 Assert that your position is different—not better, just different

The refinement that may help you avoid a defensive reaction is to keep listening to their idea longer than you normally would. Ask questions. Be curious. Really hear them out.

If you can accept that the disagreement of others doesn't diminish your ideas—that you are able to be patient and generous when people have opinions that are different from yours—you're definitely on the path to *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™.

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