

Career Path: Disagree Without Being Disagreeable

Law Department Management

Career Development



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How do you handle a tricky situation in which you're disagreeing with others? For many of us, disagreeing is difficult, awkward, and sometimes painful. Recently we discussed how to improve our thinking and decision-making by questioning our own thinking. See Career Path: Achieve Better Outcomes by Being Humble.

The sting of disappointment

Treating a painful experience as an opportunity for learning is useful for multiple reasons. Learning helps you get over the sting of disappointment, because you hope to learn something new. When you focus on learning, you focus on the future instead of dwelling on past mistakes. And, you often do learn how to perform better, which helps you get better over time.

Emotional train wrecks

People are emotional train wrecks, and many don't know how to have a civil discussion. When it comes to any topic people feel strongly about, rational and reasoned discussion is rare. Emotions drive the rules of engagement and emotions often carry the day.

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Why is this hard for me? After all, I know from my psychology studies that humans are ruled more by emotions than reason, and that we all justify our emotional decisions with supposed reasons after the fact. I think it's due to my further education in law and business, and then a couple decades working as a business lawyer, which made me a rationalist to the core.

Being a rationalist

I like to discuss and agree on premises, apply logical reasoning, and explore reasonable conclusions, of which there may be more than one. There are almost always pros, cons, and tradeoffs associated with every proposition.

Being a rationalist also means I often change my mind. Maybe I learn new facts, or the other person raises an argument I hadn't considered. Sometimes I take the opposite side of an argument just to make sure I understand it correctly. I try to be only weakly committed to my starting position.



Star Trek's Spock is a famous rationalist with superhuman reasoning capabilities.
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This process worked well not just with like-minded business colleagues, but also with negotiation partners and opposing counsel. It has been rare in my case for someone to take a business discussion ‑personally or ‑view an exploratory sally as anything other than a discussion.

Fearing controversy

Thus, I am still struggling with the fact that, increasingly, reasoned discussion is no way to win an argument, and introducing nuance is like bringing a skunk to a party. No one wants to see it, and if you try to stick it under their nose they shy away.

If my habitual method of expounding logical positions is ill-suited to discussing issues, I can tell you another method that doesn't work well: what everyone else is doing, namely giving free run to emotions and shouting at each other. Let me explain why, looking at both in-person and virtual interactions.

In-person interactions appear more civil, and I think they are more civil. This is partly because social conventions still prevent a certain amount of direct hostility. But only in small part. My observation is that face-to-face conversations are more civil primarily because most people avoid controversial topics.

Argumentative volleyball

Contrast this with online interactions. Here, there is no tentative probing. The initial volley is more likely to be inflammatory, because people are usually trying to make a point. Also, there's no one to check your inner dialogue, where your every thought is positively genius. Of course, you're right!

The return volleys to your post are either wholly in agreement, confirming your brilliance, or from someone who is apparently attacking everything you stand for and your inherent worth as a person. The proper response to such a challenge is to counterattack.

When did we get so fragile? Since when does a question or a comment, indeed anything other than slavish agreement, represent an attack on our personal integrity? It could be because the primary purpose of social networks is not to engage in reasoned debate, but to identify like-minded persons.

Going to the other side

Remember that ideas spread and become influential because they win over new adherents. If you want your ideas to gain traction you must expose them to people who do not yet agree with you. How should you deal with their questions and overcome potential objections?

Here's a tip that is supported by all my learnings in psychology, economics, law, and business: Personal insults are remarkably poor persuaders. Insults in an exchange signal failure, not victory.

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When I see someone resort to personal insults, I take it to mean their idea cannot withstand criticism. Moreover, you are all but guaranteeing that your counterpart will dismiss what you have to say further. This makes it that much harder to achieve a common understanding.

Disagreement does not have to be disagreeable. When you make an exchange personal, you not only lose the argument, you lose the chance to gain a convert to your idea.



"No rational argument will have a rational effect on a man who does not want to adopt a rational attitude." - Karl Popper
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If you find yourself shouting at strangers, stop and ask yourself why. It's unlikely to change anyone's mind. And I bet you don't feel better after doing it. If your method is ineffective, and makes you bitter and unhappy to boot, why are you still using it?

I don't expect everyone to be Spock-like in their reasoning. But I'd be happy to see reasonable minds disagree reasonably more often.

Be well.

Question, comment? Contact Career Path columnist James Bellerjeau.

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