

Active Blog
Managing

www.active-technologies.com
info@active-technologies.com

Handling Disagreements Effectively

Be reasonable. Do it my way. (Bumper Sticker Quote)

If everyone did things my way, there would never be disagreements. But that world doesn't exist and we all face disagreements every day. Most view disagreements as undesirable but actually, if handled effectively, disagreements often can lead to creative solutions that really work for everyone concerned. The following are tips on making sure disagreements become productive rather than devicive

#1: Make certain there is really a disagreement

Ever witnessed a "volatile agreement"? It can actually be funny, as long as other people, rather than you, are involved. For example:

A says, on Monday, "The report won't be available for at least two days."

B says, "That's ridiculous! We won't have it until Wednesday!"

There's no disagreement here, right? Most likely, B was expecting to hear a specific day, rather than an interval of days. In other words, B might not have been listening carefully. In this case, A could say, "Wait a minute, we're saying the same thing. Wednesday is more than two days from Monday."

A variation of the volatile agreement is the "volatile non-disagreement." For example:

A says, "Babe Ruth played for the Yankees."

B says, "Baloney; he played for the Red Sox."

Here, B's mistake is thinking that playing for the Yankees and playing for the Red Sox are mutually exclusive. However, as most people know, Babe Ruth actually played for both teams.

Other false conflicts could involve time (different time zones), distances (miles vs. kilometers), or release levels (different/additional functions, depending on the release).

I could cite other examples, but I think you get the point. Matters that appear to conflict might not really conflict at all. Listen carefully to the other person and make sure there really is a difference.

#2: Separate yourself from your position

In his classic work *The Psychology of Computer Programming*, Gerald Weinberg describes the concept of "egoless programming." Under this concept, a team of technical programmers, including the author of a program, reviews that program, checking for errors. The less defensive the programmer feels about the code, the more productive the review process will be. In other words, the process goes more smoothly if the programmer separates himself or herself from the program and doesn't view discovered errors as a personal attack.

In the same way, actors, when interviewed about a role they play, generally refer to their own character in the third person. When talking about his character, Benjamin Martin in *The Patriot*, for example [SPOILERS AHEAD], Mel Gibson would more likely say, "Gabriel's death had a big impact on Benjamin" rather than "Gabriel's death had a big impact on me." Similarly, he would more likely say, "Benjamin Martin is a man who's trying to escape his past," rather than "I am a man trying to escape my past."



**Active Blog
Managing**

www.active-technologies.com
info@active-technologies.com

Try to adopt this view of disagreements. If we involve ourselves personally with our positions, we will have a harder time being objective about them. That lack of objectivity can prolong a disagreement needlessly. Try to view your position not as “your” position, but merely “a” position. In the same way, if you have an issue with someone else’s position, make clear that your concern is with the issue, not with the person, if that’s the case.

#3: Maintain professionalism

We’ve all heard the old saying about “disagreeing without being disagreeable” and that “honey attracts flies better than vinegar.” The lesson learned, treating people with respect — even those with whom you disagree — can earn you respect in return and gives your position added credibility.

#4: LISTEN!

The volatile agreement involving the two-day delay could have been avoided had person B listened carefully. Listen to what they have to say completely before responding. If you have to interrupt, for example, because the other person is being long-winded or redundant, try to summarize your understanding first. People sometimes express themselves differently than you expect. If you fail to listen, you might find yourself responding not to the other person’s actual position, but only to what you thought the other person’s position was.

#5: Recognize and avoid “straw man” arguments

This point carries over from the previous one. It’s easy to argue against a position that no one has. Attacking a position that isn’t really the one a person holds is called a “straw man” argument because, like a straw man, it’s easily knocked down.

If you fail to listen carefully, you may find yourself wasting time reacting to such a position rather than to someone’s actual position. It’s bad enough to attack a straw man by accident; it’s ethically questionable if you do it deliberately. Similarly, make sure others really do understand your own position.

#6: Agree to disagree

Sometimes, no matter how much discussion occurs, you’re unable to agree on one particular point. In some cases, that single disagreement prevents further discussion. However, other times, you might be able to switch to other topics. If so, it’s best to “agree to disagree” on the point of contention and move on to the other areas. Maybe later you can return to the disagreement and work through it. But try to make progress in spite of the issues about this one thing.

#7: Watch what you say

Once spoken, words can never be taken back. There’s no “untalk” feature corresponding to an email “unsubscribe.” Similarly, when a stone enters a pond, it sends out ripples that go only outward. As the saying goes, “A harsh word stirs up anger.”

Momma advised my to count to 10 before answering. In particular, and in view of the earlier advice to separate person from issue, be careful about overusing the words “you” or “your” or similar terms. Doing so blurs the line between person and issue and can make the other person feel defensive or accused.



**Active Blog
Managing**

www.active-technologies.com
info@active-technologies.com

A good technique is to “play Columbo,” a reference to the old television series about a detective with that name. Peter Falk, who played the role, came across as an idiot who always needed someone to explain things to him. In the same way, if you have a disagreement or concern, consider expressing it via a question rather than via a statement. Does the other person’s position lead to a problem? Ask questions so that in answering them, the other person realizes the issue as well. Just don’t overdo this technique or it will sound contrived and insincere.

#8: Use a lower voice

Just as “A harsh word stirs up anger,” “A mild (soft) answer turns away wrath”. I have seen this used in heated boardroom debates and it works. “If you lower your voice, frequency, volume, and pace when speaking, you accomplish three things. First, you reduce any tension that might exist. Second, you force the other person to listen to you. Third, because of its unexpected nature, lowering your voice can gain you a psychological advantage in the discussion.

Case and point: Board members were arguing which direction the company should take. Passions were running high.. booming voices were shaking the walls, red eyes, veins bulging, fists shaking, I thought for sure it would turn into a fist fight! Then one manager crossed his hands behind his head, sunk down in his chair and took a long stretch like only a cat who is very comfortable could. As he softly spoke in low pear-shaped tones, the room became quite and calm. Folks listed intently and completely to his point and, in this case, it was unanimously adopted and met with great success.

#9: Try to see the other person’s point of view

In a previous blog entry, I talked about the importance of seeing the other person’s point of view when explaining a technical concept. That same principle applies with respect to disagreements. The more you understand someone’s position, the more you may understand their concerns — and the more likely you can resolve the disagreement. In fact, before responding with your own position, consider paraphrasing the other person’s position and concerns first. Doing so sends a powerful message. Even more important, emphasize first those matters upon which you and the other person agree.

#10: When the disagreement is resolved, put it behind you

We all know the saying about “water under the bridge.” Once a matter is settled, don’t keep a record of wrongs. Let it go. Dwelling on past differences seldom leads to productive results and can lead to bitterness and bad feelings. Look back only to learn from what happened, so that you can avoid similar mistakes (if any) in the future.

#11: Usually there is more than one way to get something done.

Rather than wasting time massaging your ego and debating endlessly, if their way works, just do it their way, give them credit for a good ideal, and get the job done!!!

If you require additional information or assistance with this item, please give us a call.