BUILDING BETTER RELATIONSHIPS – STEP 5: WHAT TO DO WHEN WE DISAGREE

Earlier in my career, I thought of myself as the person who could make ideas better by challenging them and finding the flaws. I wasn't doing it to be mean or a pain in the butt to my classmates and colleagues. I just believed that the best ideas were those that were challenged from my different viewpoints, and by adding pressure to the idea I could help turn it into a diamond. Now, not everyone saw my "help" as a positive thing, and I would sometimes earn a negative reputation.

For many years, I thought those other people were in the wrong, because they couldn't handle any disagreement. But then I moved to Europe, and I met some of my French and Dutch colleagues. I was a pussy cat compared to them. I would be discussing my new idea with them, and they would highlight every little flaw or mistake. I would end my presentations feeling completely insecure, but then something weird would happen. Those same colleagues that challenged every minute detail of my idea, would then come over and tell me I did a good job.

What I eventually came to realize was that those French and Dutch colleagues weren't hating my ideas. Surprisingly, it was the opposite. They were interested in my idea and were actively trying to help it succeed. Their confrontational approach was actually a sign of engagement. One I realized this, those same colleagues I thought were a pain became my go to people to help me refine my ideas. They would help me, while other colleagues would politely say an idea was good, while hiding their true feelings that the idea was crap.

It was because of this change in how I viewed my French and Dutch colleagues that I started to investigate how other cultural differences were impacting my collaboration with others. But at the same time, most books and research on cultural differences end up being nothing more than a list of stereotypes. And I didn't want to just stereotype my colleagues. Just because you are from Germany, doesn't mean you work in the stereotypical German way. So instead of trying to form relationships based on cultural stereotypes, I started to view people as individuals and try to form relationships based on their individual preferences.

And now I want to share my lessons with you. Over a series of seven articles, I will share with you the different dimensions of collaboration and leadership, and how you can improve your relationships with your colleagues, your customers, and even in your personal life. This is the fifth article of the seven and it focuses on the different ways that people disagree with each other and discuss ideas.

The Seven Dimensions of Collaboration

The seven dimensions of collaboration is not a concept I created on my own. It is founded on research by Professor Erin Meyer, from INSEAD. In her amazing book, The Culture Map, Erin Meyer highlights seven dimensions of collaboration that vary widely across cultures. The seven dimensions are:

1. How do we build trust? – Task based vs Relationship based trust
2. How do we communicate with each other – Low Context vs High Context Communication
3. What is expected from leaders? – Egalitarian Leadership vs Hierarchical Leadership
4. How do we want decisions to be made? – Consensual vs Top-Down Decisions
5. What do we do when we disagree? - Confrontational Discussion vs Avoiding Confrontation
6. How do we prefer to give and receive feedback? – Direct Feedback vs Indirect Feedback
7. What is our approach to time when it comes to accomplishing tasks and delivering results? – Linear Timelines
vs Flexible Planning

I fully recommend everyone read Erin Meyer's book, especially if you are ever working with someone from a different culture. But even if all of your colleagues and customers are from the same country, there is a ton of value in understanding the seven dimensions. Most people do not match the average cultural profile from their country. That is why I recommend trying to understand their individual preferences across the seven dimensions. By trying to understand their individual preferences, you will be able to form more productive relationships in your teams and more valuable relationships with your customers.

Dimension 5 - What Do We Do When We Disagree?

Disagreement is a natural and necessary part of working as a team. Disagreeing with each other, challenging ideas, and asking tough questions are required if we want to make great decisions. When people hide their disagreements, it significantly increases the chance of failure. Bad ideas, that everyone knows are doomed, get approved because no one speaks up. The problem is that there are different approaches to disagreement, and those differences can cause confusion within a team.

On one hand, some people see disagreement and debate as a positive thing that should be undertaken with all decisions. They believe that openly challenging other people's ideas is appropriate and will not seriously impact the relationship with the other person. These people also love it when other people challenge their ideas and disagree with them. This is called the Confrontational approach to disagreements. The downside of the Confrontational approach is that these people can come across as incredibly blunt and potentially seen as rude.

The other side of the disagreement spectrum is the Avoiding Confrontation approach. People with this type of approach see any form of disagreement or debate within a team as something negative. These people believe that group harmony is a top priority, and too much disagreement will negatively impact the team and the relationships within the team. Openly challenging another person's ideas is considered inappropriate, especially in a group setting. But just because these people will not openly disagree with you doesn't mean they don't disagree with you. Their approach to disagreement is just more subtle, and that subtlety can be lost on many people.

While you might already have a good idea on your preference for Confrontation or Avoiding Confrontation, there is an easy way to find out. Answer the below three questions, and based on your answers, you should be able to identify your preferred approach to disagreeing with other people.

1) Frequently expressing open disagreement with other team members is likely to positively affect a team's chances of success.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2) When I disagree strongly with a point made by a colleague during a presentation, I express that disagreement.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
3) Open debate, where team members challenge one another's ideas and opinions, is likely to engender bad feelings and ruin relationships.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Based on your answers, you should be able to identify your preference for how to handle any Disagreements.	**High Preference for Confrontation**	**Slight Preference for Confrontation**	**Mixed Preference**	**Slight Preference for Avoiding Confrontation**	**High Preference for Avoiding Confrontation**

Collaborating With People with Different Confrontation Preferences

It goes without saying that if both you and the other person have a Confrontational approach to disagreements, then collaborating will be easier. Similarly, if you both have the Avoiding Confrontation approach. But what do you do if you prefer to Avoid Confrontation while the other person prefers a more Confrontational approach? Or what about the reverse? Don't worry … effectively working with people with different disagreement styles is possible. All it takes is a willingness to try and adapt your style to meet their preferences.

What you should do if you prefer a more Confrontational approach, and the other person prefers to Avoid Confrontation:

· **Stop trying to win** - People with a Confrontational approach can sometimes position the disagreement as an I Win / You Lose situation. They do this by using very black & white language, like "this idea won't work." Instead of trying to win the argument, they should adopt a more curious mindset and ask questions to better understand the other person's perspective. For example, "can you help me understand how this solution will overcome X problem?"

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· **Seek out disagreement privately** - Just because the other person prefers to Avoid Confrontation doesn't mean that they agree with all your ideas. It just means they are uncomfortable doing it directly. An easy way to gather their input is to do it in a more private or informal setting. Instead of asking their opinion in front of a group, talk with them outside of the meeting. They may be more willing to give you their honest opinions privately than they would publicly.

· **Use anonymity in meetings** - If you have a group of people that prefer to Avoid Confrontation, create moments in your meeting that can gather their input anonymously. For example, ask everyone to give their feedback on an idea on a series of post-its. Then have the team review all the comments and discuss it collectively without revealing who wrote what. This will help people frame the discussion as disagreeing with an idea and not disagreeing with a person.

· **Remove sources of authority** - Some people have trouble disagreeing with their leaders, especially those people on the Hierarchical leadership spectrum (see Dimension #3). If this is the case, create opportunities for gathering the input of the team without the leader being present. For example, have the team review the positives and negatives of an idea without the leader. Then the team can create an anonymous summary of the discussion and send it to the leader.

What you should do if you prefer to Avoid Confrontation and the other person prefers a more Confrontational approach:

· **Don't take it personally** - People that prefer to Avoid Confrontation can see Confrontation as harmful to the team or even as a personal attack. "Why are they attacking my ideas? Do they think I am unqualified?" In those situations, you should remember that disagreement is seen as a good thing for people with the Confrontational approach. Even if it is difficult, you should view confrontation as a sign of engagement and enthusiasm from the person. If they weren't interested in your idea, they wouldn't be saying anything.

· **Create space for disagreement** - People with a Confrontational approach to disagreement need to be able to voice their opinions in order to be committed to an idea. If you are worried about their impact on the team, then reach out to these Confrontational people before the meeting. By gathering their input ahead of time, you can transform them into a supporter in the meeting.

· **Be Confrontational back to them** - The other person expects you to disagree with their ideas and help them refine their solutions. So, adopting a little of their approach will be perceived as a positive thing in their eyes. That being said, you shouldn't do anything that makes you feel uncomfortable. While I was able to be a lot more direct with my French and Dutch colleagues, I never fully adopted their approach.

· **Play the "Devil's Advocate"** - Sometimes it is easier to be Confrontational and disagree when you are playing a role. So next time you are working with a more Confrontational person, frame your disagreements as you are playing the "Devil's Advocate." This will allow you to discuss multiple perspectives and even disagree while ensuring that people do not perceive your actions as a personal attack. You aren't Confrontational, it is just the role you are playing.

What Is Your Ideal Meeting?

Here is a simple thought exercise for you. Finish the following sentence. I believe that a great meeting is one where:

1. An important decision is made and follow-up actions are determined.
2. Various viewpoints are discussed and debated.
3. A formal stamp is put on a decision that has already been made before the meeting through more informal meetings.

Depending on where you fall on the Confrontation / Avoiding Confrontation spectrum, you will probably prefer a different type of meeting. People with a more Confrontational approach want to hash out ideas IN the meeting, while people with Avoiding Confrontation want to do it BEFORE the meeting.

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Unfortunately, too many people assume that their approach to meetings and disagreements is the right way. They don't take the time to understand the benefits of other approaches, nor do they consider the limitations to their own approaches. But when we are able to recognize that different people have different preferences for working together, we can improve our teamwork. For example, when inviting people, we can be explicit in what type of meeting it will be. Sometimes it is needed to have a vigorous team debate, and other times it is a validation meeting meant to ensure we are all in agreement on a decision.

But the important thing to remember in that example is that we need to be explicit about what type of meeting it will be. Letting them know ahead of time gives them a heads up on what type of desired behaviors the team should adopt in the meeting. In the validation type meeting, you wouldn't want the Confronting people to blow up the idea you had all agreed on. Similarly, in a debating meeting you don't want the Avoiding Confrontation people to remain silent. By talking about your disagreement differences and adapting to the different styles of others, you will be able to have the kind of open and honest collaboration needed for a successful team.

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