

The Art of Respectful Debate: How to Disagree without Being Contentious

Your toolkit matters and is much different than you might think



- Take responsibility for your current set of beliefs and assumptions.
 - One of the ways debate turns ugly is when fingers start being pointed. The root of this is someone else didn't do their job the way the person point the finger expected or wanted. What this does is put the person on the defensive. Which then usually results in retaliation and finger pointing going the other way.
 - What does this sound like? The statements always start with "You..." "You said this was included. You said you would have this done. You said you were going to do this."
 - The way to counter this with the intent of having a productive conversation is to take responsibility for what your current beliefs or assumptions are and pose this as the way in. These statements start with "I..." "I was under the assumption that this would be included. I thought that based on the timeline we had established that this would be done by now. I thought that based on the scope you were going to do this next."
 - The reality of the situation is that no matter how hard we try in being crystal clear, there is always room left for interpretation, there are always excuses (some good, some not), there are different lenses for seeing every situation. The point of this is to realize this by validating your own assumptions versus making someone wrong.
 - Realize that your beliefs and assumptions are likely NOT the exact same as the other person - as people, we are all different. Instead of getting frustrated by what you expected, try to give some grace to the other person, assume positive intent and THEN start the conversation.
- Know when you are being objective or subjective.
 - As we have preached MANY times, it is always good to have objective sources and references to use in order to anchor the conversation. This comes in the form of briefs, processes, protocols, best practices...this allows you to debate the merit of the solution/POV/idea versus the way you feel about it.
 - Debates escalate when we try to disguise a subjective conversations as and objective conversations. What do I mean by this? Many times when we feel a certain way about something, we don't want to admit it. Instead, we try to strengthen our argument by trying to make objective points out of subjective principles.
 - Example: My husband asks me where I want to go for dinner and suggests his favorite Mexican restaurant...which also happens to be the one owned by a friend of his. I really don't feel like this restaurant at all but don't want to say that because it may hurt his feelings. So, instead I start providing points as to why going there isn't a good idea. I may say...well you know, we just had Mexican the other night. Or, it gets really busy on Sat nights and we will have to wait and I am hungry. All feel like legitimate points on the surface, but what they are disguising is my feeling about the situation.
 - We do this at work too when we don't have a really good reason for something but we feel a certain way. We call this running an agenda. And if the other person doesn't realize it, what happens is the conversations start becoming personal because the discussion is based on a feeling.
 - The best way to counter this is to ask...is this the way you feel or is this based on data/experience/direction (more objective principles). Either could be valid. Knowing which one you are debating is key.
 - We tend to get heated and emotionally charged right off the bat. Take a deep breath, a step back, and process through the emotion before assessing here. When you can get to a calmer place this allows you to be more objective.
- Don't let it get personal.
 - Debates tend to deteriorate when they become personal. Which is why we mentioned in the previous point how important it is to know the origin of the debate topic. As soon as a person's character is being challenged, the respectful part of the debate ceases to exist. At this point, the conversation needs to be halted.
 - The next stage is to diffuse the situation which usually means all parties going to separate corners to cool down and process. The energy needs to come down before you can re-engage in the debate. At this point, there are three likely conclusions and paths forward:
 - You are not likely to get anything further from the debate. So, you need to make the decision based on what you know.
 - Certain individuals rise as being more knowledgeable or credible, so you seek them out to finalize your decision.
 - You let everyone cool down and then you bring them back to the discussion with stricter rules for engagement.
 - In all scenarios, you acknowledge the input of the group and clearly provide your decision and rationale for the decision. Then you ask everyone to commit to getting in the boat and rowing. Those that can't may need another look to see if they are a good fit for the culture.
 - Also consider repeat offenders vs. one-off situations. we spend a LOT of time with the people we work with. We all have bad days. Again, we are human. HOWEVER, repeat offenders are more problematic, distracting, and can over time do some major damage to the culture and credibility of the organization for other employees and in total.
- Define and consistently reinforce the common goal.
 - Just like ensuring you have objective resources, you should always have a common goal. This is the key to creating highly-functioning teams. You can't have highly-functioning teams without a common goal than is bigger than any one person can deliver. If the goal is too aligned with any one person, discipline, function, etc. people start adopting that goal as their personal quest and they forget about the role of the entire team.
 - What this also helps to do is reinforce the culture that we are all in this together and it takes all of us to achieve this. When everyone is aligned to the goal, the chances are better that a person will see another person's "feedback" as valid input versus a personal agenda. Or in other words, people have a better chance of believing that a person is coming from a "good" place.
 - It is worth repeating that only highly-functioning teams can have respectful debate because at the heart of that is respect. And with respect comes trust.
 - In the midst of a debate, if you forsee it going off the rails, remind people of the common goal and reorient the discussion to weigh the merits of the ideas/challenges/POV's against what has the best change to achieve that goal. A rubric or some sort-of criteria based rating system can be a good way to bring objectivity approach this conversation.