

## *Original Paper*

# Crucial Workplace Conversations: Productive Debate and Disagreement

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Creating positive changes within an organization is a multifactorial process. It is a process that must begin with everyone being heard. Cognitive diversity, or diversity of thought, is a tremendously valuable asset that makes teams smarter than they would be if guided by homogeneous thinking. The input of diverse opinions and multiple perspectives serves to create a better understanding of complex situations (Surowiecki, 2005).

In order to optimize innovation, problem-solving, creativity, decision-making, and outcomes; we must be open to first hearing and appreciating each other's point of view. As such, organizations must create and foster a culture and an environment where everyone contributes their unique diverse expertise and broad-ranging opinions. People must be encouraged to exchange their myriad differing ideas with one shared goal; working together to find better solutions. Listening to, and respecting contrasting perspectives creates opportunities for all of us to learn something new. This strategy also serves to build a more inclusive and a more engaged work environment; one that benefits from broad buy-in by the entire team (Dempsey, 2017).

While creating obvious benefits, diverse thinking among groups is also fraught with unintended consequences. Namely, disagreements and conflict. While these can be uncomfortable, they are nevertheless the required "cost of doing business" so as to ultimately achieve progress. A culture of well-managed, respectful, open, constructive challenges supports cognitive diversity.

While teams may understand that they must learn to navigate conflict successfully and effectively, the reality is that a culture of silence is pervasive in many organizations. People are reluctant to speak up. They believe that doing so is futile; believing that in the end, it will just not make any difference. Taken one step further, they see speaking up as potentially dangerous to their careers. They feel that challenging the status quo has the potential for personal and professional risks, threatening their relationships with supervisors and coworkers. There is concern over repercussions, including negative performance reviews, less desirable assignments, or even termination (Kalina, 2019). Awareness of these potential consequences results in people staying quiet. It is easier. It is safer. Alternatively,

perhaps they assume that someone more senior will speak up. The problem with these philosophy's is that in order to achieve optimal outcomes, we must first have disagreements. We have all heard that "you have to break a few eggs to make an omelet!"

Of course, it is not just about what you say, but also how you say it. Expressing disagreements productively is an art form. Some people may have a great perspective, but their presentation is alienating. For greater success, try not to be judgmental. Debate only the facts-not opinions. Focus on the topic - not the other person. Avoid confirmation bias. Do not ignore evidence that goes against your beliefs (Grohol, 2020). Avoid echo chambers. Do not limit your interactions to like-minded people (Tobak, 2019). Additional requirements for success include mutual respect, emotional intelligence, curiosity, active listening, open-mindedness, and an ability to change your perspective when needed. When appropriate, be willing to admit you were wrong.

It takes courage to speak up, to challenge, and to step out of your comfort zone. This is especially true if you are disagreeing with the majority. For debate to be successful, it cannot be about who is the loudest, the most powerful, or the most articulate (Kalina, 2020). It should not be about persuading people you are right, getting your way, proving your superiority, or looking better than someone. It should be about a shared goal, among equal participants, working together as a team to solve problems. When someone has a different point of view than your own, there is a tendency to either avoid a conversation with that person (Hutton, 2019), or to try to convince them they are wrong. These approaches are both counterproductive. Perspective-taking is critical-be willing to engage with another's views and show genuine interest in their perspective (Sessa, 1996).

In any successful organization, *all employees* must feel they have permission to have the difficult conversations required for creating positive change. Organizations must convey that everyone will be protected and valued for sharing suggestions, opinions, and concerns. Leaders must proactively encourage open debate wherein everyone has a voice (Shanefelt, 2017). Silence and conflict avoidance, especially by leaders, contributes to suboptimal outcomes, including lack of accountability. Relying too heavily on consensus and conformity risks leading to stagnation. Conversely, excessive conflict and toxic employees challenge leadership and organizations (Dimmock, 2018; Prath, 2016). The goal is *balance*.

Successful team problem-solving is only partly about *getting along*. A significant component is also the ability to *not get along* in an optimal manner. Simply avoiding all conflict in the workplace is actually worse than conflict. "Nice" conversations, where people just agree with one another, or hold back what they really think, are not the way to optimize outcomes (Hutton, 2019). Do not be afraid to have the crucial conversations. The cautionary tale is that there are consequences to being too nice!

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