

**PRODUCTIVITY**

## 7 Ways Amazing Leaders Encourage Healthy Debate

There is no shortage of arguments in the workplace. Use these tips to make sure value comes from conflict.



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**NEXT  
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Some people just love to argue. They will use any opportunity to debate or challenge. Constant debate is not a problem in itself; most **brilliance** comes from healthy and passionate conflict. The challenge occurs when people argue or create conflict without a positive purpose.

Differing styles of debate can also create difficult issues in the workplace. Aggressive personalities tend to be overly antagonistic when dealing with any conflict, unintentionally

inflating minor issues into major problems that can **demotivate** everyone involved. It would be helpful if people were actually aware of their style, but unfortunately, few are so self-aware.

Whichever side of the argument you are on, you can keep the debate professional and the dangerous emotions to a minimum by following these simple habits that really successful leaders employ.

### **1. They start in the spirit of inquiry.**

Most people start debating with a specific agenda. Often that agenda is to be right. This is a recipe for disaster. The other party can sense right away that they are under attack and will go immediately into defensive mode. The inner voices on both sides will grow loud and block good information from reaching the brain.

Amazing leaders are not interested in winning for their own ego. They understand that finding the truth benefits the **whole team** so everyone can win. It's possible that someone has discovered patterns and effects that were beyond your thinking. Open your mind and look for answers, not victory.

### **2. They don't assume anything from email.**

Email and text are great communication tools that often bring convenience and clarity to the work place — except when **they don't**. Without a face or a voice to convey emotion, written text can easily be misconstrued as being terse, sarcastic, snarky, or even mean. Most often these emotions come from the person reading it who projects their own approach onto the text. If the reader is having a bad day or lacks respect for the sender, they are likely to read that message with that affecting tone in his or her head. Readers who may be particularly sarcastic or aggressive in nature will automatically apply their own style to the message, as well.

Amazing leaders are interested in truth. Before they fully react to something they read in a powerful or negative manner, they will consider all the possibilities of meaning and then approach the discussion verbally in an open and considerate way. Additionally, they carefully consider their tone when **writing emails** as well. Always assume you don't know the tone of any written communication you receive and openly inquire as to the emotions of your debate partner.

### **3. They state, up front, the desired outcome.**

Many people enter into a debate ready to battle with only one side knowing the rules and purpose of engagement. This does give them great advantage, but usually at the expense of any productivity and congeniality. They aren't intentionally strategic with this approach. They just assume that all people engage in conflict the same way and give little consideration for the person on the other side of the conversation.

Amazing leaders want a clear agenda with purposeful debate. They want to keep the spirit uplifting and obtain positive results for the company no matter how deep the discourse. Before beginning any debate or argument, discuss with the other party a purposeful outcome and define clear rules of engagement.

NEXT  
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#### **4. They give others the benefit of the doubt.**

When people are busy their emotions and behavioral patterns can get the best of them. Intelligent debaters often get ahead of themselves, making assumptions about what the other person thinks or feels. If the emotions are high, debaters might assume that the other parties are against them. And maybe they are . . . but maybe they are not.

Amazing leaders counter-intuitively accept that moments of debate and argument are actually the time to dial things back and be reflective. That way, cooler heads can prevail and usefulness can come from the conflict. Unless it's a life or death situation or your job is at stake, keep the emotion low and believe what the other party is communicating about their emotion and perspective. No need to exacerbate a stressful situation with accusations of dishonesty or disingenuousness. Keep the attacks to the facts.

#### **5. They want to learn more than they want to win.**

Unfortunately, most companies foster politics better than they do productivity. People use conversation as a way to manage problems rather than support discovery. Often, when someone brings up an issue that may be conflictive with current policy or belief, management looks to tamp things down or avoid the conflict so it doesn't get in the way of their perceived productivity.

Amazing leaders know that this keep-it-moving approach results in long term mediocrity. They see any small conflict like a cockroach in a slum wall — if one shows up, there must be many more behind the surface. They can't wait to learn what really exists beneath the outer layer and why. When conflict arises unexpectedly, seize the opportunity to examine the circumstances and the underlying issues. You may find solutions that prevent huge systemic breakdowns or open you to massive new opportunities.

#### **6. They treat others as comrades not adversaries.**

An office or business is a fascinating ecosystem that often combines unlikely people in high-pressure ways without concern for personality, style, or methodology. Everyone just assumes that people will find a way to get along. In reality, it takes effort on everyone's part.

Amazing leaders know that fostering a positive work environment with healthy conflict cannot happen by accident even with the smartest people. In fact, the smarter the people are, the more effort it takes to get them to work together happily and productively. Start every debate thinking of the other person as your best friend. Seek to help them understand and feel good about the engagement at the beginning, middle and end. Remember, you don't know yet how important this person is to your future. No need to create enemies early.

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#### **7. They make sure everyone is comfortable with the process.**

Debate can raise tempers and emotions even when the topic is academic in nature. Passionate people will communicate in passionate ways. It's okay to let things heat up, but you have to release the pressure after the battle or resentment will occur and build in an aggregated matter.

Amazing leaders value their people and commit the time to promote good morale. They make sure to check in and resolve any existing conflict so everyone can move on to the next project as a healthy team. If you are engaging in a high conflict environment, make sure you devote energy to building rapport amongst the team, especially when the debate has concluded. Don't just assume that everyone is comfortable, especially if you won. You have the responsibility to make sure everyone is whole, even if it means you have to apologize for taking things too far for the circumstances. The higher the trust, the better the output from healthy and hot debate. Otherwise you'll never get past the low hanging assumptions and uncover the productive truths that will ensure success.

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# Should Small Businesses Be Entitled to Government Subsidies?

In this week's episode, *Inc.* editor Jim Ledbetter and Felix Salmon, a senior editor at Fusion, debate whether the government should dole out subsidies to small-business owners to support job growth.



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Welcome to a new segment on our Inc. Uncensored podcast: Serious Business, where we debate the hottest topics at the intersection of policy and business.

On the second edition of Serious Business, *Inc.* editor Jim Ledbetter and Fusion senior editor Felix Salmon debate whether government should give subsidies to small businesses in order to help boost job growth. Ledbetter says yes and Salmon says no. Find out why in the episode above. Who won the debate? Let us know at [uncensored@inc.com](mailto:uncensored@inc.com).

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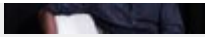
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@ 08:46 HopStop Founder: 'My Superpower Is Creativity'

| 10:29



@ 19:15 **Why Founders Need to Put Their Company in Front of Their Job**

| 6:49



@ 26:04 **Why Access to Information Is the Biggest Entrepreneurial ...**

| 4:07

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NEXT  
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