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Difficult Conversations

How to Disagree with Someone More Powerful than You

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Summary. How exactly do you voice dissent with your superior? And is it always worth it to do so? Communication experts say that while just agreeing feels easier, it's not always the best decision to make. First, weigh the risk of pushback or a negative reaction from a boss... **more**

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Your boss proposes a new initiative you think won't work. Your senior colleague outlines a project timeline you think is unrealistic. What do you say when you disagree with someone who has more power than you do? How do you decide whether it's worth speaking up? And if you do, what exactly should you say?

What the Experts Say

It's a natural human reaction to shy away from disagreeing with a superior. "Our bodies specialize in survival, so we have a natural bias to avoid situations that might harm us," says Joseph Grenny, the coauthor of *Crucial Conversations* and the cofounder of VitalSmarts, a corporate training company. "The heart of the anxiety is that there will be negative implications," adds Holly Weeks, the author of *Failure to Communicate*. We immediately think, "He's not going to like me," "She's going to think I'm a pain," or maybe even "I'll get fired." Although "it's just plain easier to agree," Weeks says that's not always the right thing to do. Here's how to disagree with someone more powerful than you.

Be realistic about the risks

Most people tend to overplay the risks involved in speaking up. "Our natural bias is to start by imagining all the things that will go horribly wrong," Grenny says. Yes, your counterpart might be surprised and a little upset at first. But chances are you're not going to get fired or make a lifelong enemy. He suggests you first consider "the risks of *not* speaking up" — perhaps the project will be derailed or you'll lose the team's trust — then realistically weigh those against the potential consequences of taking action.

Decide whether to wait

After this risk assessment, you may decide it's best to hold off on voicing your opinion. Maybe "you haven't finished thinking the problem through, the whole discussion was a surprise to you, or you want to get a clearer sense of what the group thinks," says Weeks. "If you think other people are going to disagree too, you might want to gather your army first. People can contribute experience or information to your thinking — all the things that would make the disagreement stronger or more valid." It's also a good idea to delay the conversation if you're in a meeting or other public space. Discussing the issue in private will make the powerful person feel less threatened.

Identify a shared goal

Before you share your thoughts, think about what the powerful person cares about — it may be "the credibility of their team or getting a project done on time," says Grenny. You're more likely to be heard if you can connect your disagreement to a "higher purpose." When you do speak up, don't assume the link will be clear. You'll want to state it overtly, contextualizing your statements so that you're seen not as a disagreeable underling but as a colleague who's trying to advance a shared goal. The discussion will then become "more like a chess game than a boxing match," says Weeks.

Ask permission to disagree

This step may sound overly deferential, but, according to Grenny, it's a smart way to give the powerful person "psychological safety" and control. You can say something like, "I know we seem to be moving toward a first-quarter commitment here. I have reasons to think that won't work. I'd like to lay out my reasoning. Would that be OK?" This gives the person a choice, "allowing them to verbally opt in," says Grenny. And, assuming they say yes, it will make you feel more confident about voicing your disagreement.

Stay calm

You might feel your heart racing or your face turning red, but do whatever you can to remain neutral in both your words and actions. When your body language communicates reluctance or anxiety, it undercuts the message, Weeks says. It sends "a mixed message, and your counterpart gets to choose what to read," she explains. Deep breaths can help, as can speaking more slowly and deliberately. "When we feel panicky we tend to talk louder and faster. You don't want to be mousey or talk in a whisper, but simply slowing the pace and talking in an even tone helps calm the other person down and does the same for you," says Grenny. It also makes you seem confident, even if you aren't.

Validate the original point

After you've gotten permission, articulate the other person's point of view. What is the idea, opinion, or proposal that you're disagreeing with? Stating that clearly, possibly even better than your counterpart did, lays a strong foundation for the discussion. "You want your counterpart to say, 'She understands.' You don't want to get in a fight about whether you get her point," Weeks explains.

Don't make judgments

When you move on to expressing your concerns, watch your language carefully. Grenny says to avoid any "judgment words" such as "short-sighted," "foolish," or "hasty" that might set off your counterpart; one of his tips is to cut out all adjectives, since "they have the potential to be misinterpreted or taken personally." Share only facts. For example, instead of saying, "I think that first-quarter deadline is *naïve*," you can say, "We've tried four projects like this in the past, and we were able to do two in a similar time period, but those were special circumstances."

Weeks also recommends staying neutral and focused: “Lay off the players and be vivid about the problem. Try to make it an honest disagreement, a worthwhile advancement of thought.”

Stay humble

Emphasize that you’re offering your opinion, not “gospel truth,” says Grenny. “It may be a well-informed, well-researched opinion, but it’s still an opinion, [so] talk tentatively and slightly understate your confidence.” Instead of saying something like, “If we set an end-of-quarter deadline, we’ll never make it,” say, “This is just my opinion, but I don’t see how we will make that deadline.” Weeks suggests adding a lot of “guiding phrases” like “I’m thinking aloud here.” This will leave room for dialogue. Having asserted your position (as a position, not as a fact), “demonstrate equal curiosity about other views,” says Grenny. Remind the person that this is your point of view, and then invite critique. Weeks suggests trying something like, “Tell me where I’m wrong with this.” Be genuinely open to hearing other opinions.

Acknowledge their authority

Ultimately, the person in power is probably going to make the final decision, so acknowledge that. You might say, “I know you’ll make the call here. This is up to you.” That will not only show that you know your place but also remind them that they have choices, Grenny says. Don’t backtrack on your opinion or give false praise, though. “You want to show respect to the person while maintaining your own self-respect,” says Weeks.

Principles to Remember

Do:

- Explain that you have a different opinion and ask if you can voice it.

- Restate the original point of view or decision so it's clear you understand it.
- Speak slowly — talking in an even tone calms you and the other person down.

Don't:

- Assume that disagreeing is going to damage your relationship or career — the consequences are often less dramatic than we think.
- State your opinions as facts; simply express your point of view and be open to dialogue.
- Use judgment words, such as "hasty," "foolish," or "wrong," that might upset or incite your counterpart.

Case Study #1: Show respect for the idea

Victor Chiu, a business development manager at Centaria Properties, in Vancouver, was concerned that his boss, Patrick, was making a hasty decision. Weak Canadian oil prices had created favorable economic conditions for snatching up real estate, and there was a small plot of land with an operations warehouse in Alberta that Patrick thought the company should buy. At the time, Victor says, "Alberta's economy was just starting to feel the pinch. Oil was at $45 a barrel and was still on its way down — without any signs of stabilization." He was worried that the company would be overextended if it made the purchase, so he decided to speak up.

Victor looked his boss in the eye, spoke in a "smooth, casual tone," and asked Patrick to keep an open mind about the proposal. He said, "I think it's a great idea, but with oil just starting to slide and with no bottoming out in sight, bigger and better opportunities should present themselves in the near future." He knew it was important to show respect for Patrick and

his idea and to emphasize that he wanted the best for the company. He also made sure to propose a solution: “Let’s wait a bit to see if we can get a better deal, and then pull the trigger.”

“When you disagree with someone more powerful than you, you should always have a constructive reason to oppose. In my case, the reason was timing,” Victor says. Patrick didn’t take offense and was curious to hear more about Victor’s reasoning. Ultimately, they decided to hold off on making the investment.

Case Study #2: Make it about the company, not you

Mike McRitchie, owner of the consultancy Critical Path Action, has had reason to disagree with people more powerful than he on several occasions.

In a previous job, as the director of operations for a small consulting business, he disagreed with how his boss, the owner of the company, wanted to handle a health insurance decision. The boss wanted to survey the staff about two different options, letting them make the final choice on which one to adopt. But “as leaders, this was a decision I felt we should be making rather than delegating it to the whole staff,” Mike explains. “I’m all for getting feedback, but when it comes time to make a tough call, it isn’t fair to put that responsibility on the staff’s shoulders.”

Mike decided to share his opinion, emphasizing his commitment to the firm and making sure that his body language was not “at all unsure or tentative.” His boss was shocked at first; Mike had a reputation for being reserved, so open disagreement was “out of character” for him. But his boss could see that “I cared for the company and our leaders and staff,” Mike says. “I had no personal agenda.”

The boss agreed to abandon the staff poll idea, and "he's respected me to this day," Mike adds. "If you make it about the company's best interests, instead of about you, then you have the best opportunity to win."

Amy Gallo is a contributing editor at Harvard Business Review, co-host of the Women at Work podcast, and the author of the *HBR Guide to Dealing with Conflict*. She writes and speaks about workplace dynamics. Watch her TEDx talk on conflict and follow her on Twitter.

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