

Leadership

Arguing At Work

Heidi Brown, 10.02.09, 12:00 PM ET

An idea is tossed around at a brainstorming meeting. The group seems to really go for it, although one woman disagrees. But rather than speaking up, she sits in stony silence.



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Acknowledge Your Opponent

You're in a meeting and in a deadlock over ideas with the *other* vice president of the firm. Show that you're listening by paraphrasing his point of view. Never shy away from playing devil's advocate—ask, "Is there anything we can see that might go wrong with this plan?" Pose the question to the group so that he doesn't feel singled out. Then say, "How about we look at this from another perspective?" and offer your thoughts.

Is she shy? Possibly. Or maybe she has no opinion on the topic. In this case, though, she's not chiming in because in the past, when she's suggested an alternate point of view, someone always bats it down--and the group moves on. Paralyzed, the woman sinks back in her chair, dying to say something but feeling resentful of everyone in the room.

The problem isn't exclusive to female professionals, of course. But women do tend to be more self-conscious in group settings. Women are also more likely to take criticism personally. Those two elements--sensitivity and self-consciousness--can make it very hard for professional women to disagree in a respectful manner.

There's nothing wrong with disagreement in the workplace, so long as it's dealt with professionally. Strategizing and keeping your reactions in check is the easiest route to navigating the landmine of on-the-job arguments.



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Be Direct

If you work with someone regularly and find you're often disagreeing, acknowledge the situation. Say you've noticed that the two of you tend to have differences and wonder if there's any way to resolve them. Sometimes, just bringing up the obvious will prompt the other person to change her attitude.

Career coach Molly Shepard counsels women to manage their workplace relationships strategically. "Women see themselves as outsiders," she says. "They don't spend enough time figuring out who the decision makers are and bringing them over to our side." The obvious downside when it comes to workplace conflict? "They jump into battle" without the safety net of others.

"You need to do some pre-work"--before you enter the conference room arena, advises Shepard. Find out who your allies and challengers are. Share your position on the contentious agenda topic or an idea with them ahead of time. You may even be able to sway some opposing opinions in your favor.

Your goal--to be prepared--helps them too. Shepard says she's found that men in particular don't like to be caught off guard. "Men do this effectively," she says. They make it their business to "know where Joe stands."

Personalize your audience and know what their concerns and objectives are.



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Don't Take It Personally

If an idea of yours gets shot down privately or publicly--even with a "that's a stupid idea"--don't take it as discriminating criticism. Some people are rude. And others speak without thinking. Also, even the savviest people *can* have lame ideas from time to time. Give yourself--and the other person--a break and move on to your next great presentation.

Then ready yourself for debate with the people who are still dissenters.

"Visualize who you might have a disagreement with at the meeting," counsels Shepard. "Think about what could be said that hits your hot button and will make you react emotionally."

If you suspect (or know) that one or more individuals are out to intentionally sabotage you, tell your supporters about it beforehand. Remember to ask for back-up if they see someone trying to torpedo your efforts.



Build Strategic Relationships

Women tend to see themselves as outsiders and don't spend enough time figuring out who the decision makers are. It's harder for a boss or colleagues with juice to back you up when they don't know you well. Spend time fostering relationships and letting others know where you stand on particular issues.

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Honesty counts with your partners and your opponents at work. How many times have you worked with a colleague on a project only to find that the two of you frequently disagree on direction? The solution: When it comes to finding common ground, don't be afraid to say out loud that you're having trouble coming to a mutual understanding. Then try to build an approach around what you can both agree on.

Above all, says Shepard, don't leave a meeting intending to go your own way. "Because then you've got an enemy--who might be better connected than you."

But the problem can go the other way. Women can steamroll dissenters as vigorously as men.

Lori Dernavich, who consults to companies going through a restructuring, tells of a woman who was brought in at the top to turn the company around. Dernavich was hired to get the team working as a whole, but she found this to be a tough assignment.

"She didn't care what people had to say," Dernavich recalls. "It turned out that she wanted to come in and show the senior team that she was in control. She's still there, but I've found out the executive team is all looking for jobs."

The best way to keep from alienating people is to let them know you're "hearing" them. "You can assure the person you respect them, that you're open-minded; you can give them the floor." Another helpful tactic is to acknowledge what they've said by paraphrasing their statements back to them.

Then try to get them to take your side, without making them feel attacked. Dernavich suggests saying, "I know this is where you come from ... let's play devil's advocate: Let's look at what could go wrong." You can also pose the question to the group, so the speaker doesn't feel personally attacked.



Use Your Back-up Support

You know that certain someone who usually disagrees with you in meetings or shoots down your ideas over group e-mails? We're not talking about ganging up on him or her, but it is worthwhile to ask your supporters to be on the alert and give you back-up. Nothing says respect more than, well, the respect of others.

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Remember, too, Dervavich, notes, that many people--men and women--lack confidence in their jobs or careers, especially in this economy. "Are they fearful that they'll lose their job if they didn't come up with the idea?" she suggests. "It might help you not to take things so personally."

Balancing professional disagreements without stumbling into out-and-out conflict can seem like a tightrope walk. "Because we're strong and opinionated and smart, we will always have people who don't agree with us," says Shepard. "It's how we handle it that allows us to disagree without tears."

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