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How to Disagree

Go up against your boss or a senior executive and live to tell the tale.

By Kevin Daley

Let's say you've been directed to reduce your training department's budget when it's already stretched as much as possible. Or you've been asked to provide training that you know would put your learners to sleep. Or maybe you've been told to promote someone you feel isn't ready for the job, or to move to a blended solution that seems unbalanced. You feel you have to disagree, but how?

Similar to death and taxes, having to

disagree with the boss is a fact of working life. Indeed, it's your responsibility to push back when you feel that your organization will be harmed by a supervisor's decision. Here's how to disagree successfully with your boss or a senior executive—and make the interaction both a learning experience and a chance to show your smarts.

Begin by committing yourself to meet the challenge objectively, without defen-

siveness or anger. Be honest with yourself about your motives: Are you focusing on the goals of the business or protecting your job? Are you harboring resentment that it's the boss and not you who has decision-making authority? Are you questioning his directive because you think he's a dummy who couldn't possibly be suggesting something good? Also consider how you resolved previous disagreements with your boss. Did you "win" and show such glee that she started to resent you? Did you show such disappointment when your idea was turned down that she thinks you're inflexible?

Dos and don'ts

After you've verified your motives and considered past attempts, you're almost ready to meet with your boss. Before you arrange that meeting, study these dos and don'ts.

Don't say, "That won't work." That response to a directive could cost you your job. And don't use the dreaded word *disagree*.

Don't immediately offer your solution. Instead, acknowledge that you've heard what your boss wants you to do and then take some time to think the situation through. Maybe your boss has information that you don't. Or maybe his way takes into account a long-term perspective. Put yourself in the boss's shoes as much as you can. Think through his goals, including personal ones. Consider what's good about his plan.

Do request a meeting with confidence. If you begin your meeting request with "I may not be right, but..." your lack of confidence could doom your solution. Try something like, "I have some ideas about a good way to meet that goal. Can we get together to talk about them?"

If previous experience has taught you that your boss isn't open to discussing her decisions, you may want to send an email or leave a voicemail message asking if she wants to hear your ideas. That lets her pass on your suggestions in a way that doesn't put pressure on either of you.

The meeting

Begin the meeting by giving your boss the floor. He may want to discuss another aspect of the issue or talk about something else. You won't get his attention until he's done that. Listen patiently, showing that you're doing so with your words and body language.

From the beginning of the meeting, you want to make it clear that your objective is to understand your boss's goals and the reasons behind them. Ask open-ended questions: What are the outcomes you expect? Who's going to be affected? Have you determined a budget for the project? How will you measure success? Your classroom experience will be helpful here.

If the policy or decision you disagree with has been in place for some time, it's likely that the boss approves of it. Ask her what she likes about it, so that your solution provides those benefits. Then ask what she doesn't like so your plan eliminates those problems.

Paraphrase your boss's answers to be sure you understand fully. Confirm your understanding by asking him yes or no questions. That will help you clarify any misunderstandings, show him respect, and assure him that the plan you'll present is based on his needs.

As you describe your plan, test your boss's reaction by asking, What do you think? or Does that make sense? Throughout the dialogue, be alert for verbal and physical clues about whether you're on the right track.

If it's clear from how the boss is reacting that your plan needs major adjusting, don't try to fix it during the meeting. Ask for a follow-up meeting instead. Set the date and time, and then thank your boss for giving you the information you need and agreeing to talk further.

How to be persuasive

Whether you describe your plan at the first meeting or a subsequent one, do it enthusiastically, tying your ideas in with your

A True Story

A training director at a business forms publishing company learned that the CEO was eliminating sales training to cut costs. His boss, a senior vice president, advised him to talk to the CEO directly to show his leadership. So, the training director asked the CEO's secretary for a 15-minute appointment.

At the meeting, the training director drew out the CEO's reasoning for the decision. He asked permission to talk with the CEO's six direct reports and come back the following Monday with a way to reduce costs without eliminating the training.

The director met with all six people during the next few days over breakfast, lunch, and dinner, making appeals tied into each person's needs. One of the meetings was with the head of marketing, who offered \$250,000 for the training with the understanding that it would tie into three marketing initiatives.

The following Monday, the training director offered the CEO a choice of options that provided the needed training at a lower cost. The director pointed out that the training program would address the CEO's personal concern that the salespeople, many of whom were young and inexperienced, weren't relating to the senior executives who were their customers. And he told the CEO about the \$250,000 pledge from the marketing department. The CEO liked what he'd heard, and he kept the program.

boss's goals as he's described them.

Offer suggestions rather than conclusions; the latter might make you sound pompous. Though you may feel it's urgent to implement your solution, don't talk about "an explosive situation" or use

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other language from pulp fiction. Avoid jargon, clichés, and buzzwords; they won't impress him.

Anticipate questions about your plan and be ready to answer each one briefly. You're more likely to be asked big-picture questions rather than for details about how many employees you'll put in the classroom, what facilities you'll use, or how many manuals you'll need. Be prepared to discuss implementation costs, your ability to carry out your other duties while spearheading your plan, its impact on other departments, and any unintended consequences.

Expect some of the boss's feedback to be disappointing. When you reply, don't use negative words such as *but*, *although*, or *however*, and don't say *no* because that can sound confrontational.

Are you ready?

Even when everyone in an organization is aligned on common goals, conflict is inevitable. People bring different experiences, mindsets, and expectations to their jobs. Directives may be unclear, organizational changes may cause resentment, stressed managers may make unrealistic demands, or individuals may try power grabs. You can't avoid having disagreements.

If you handle them improperly, you can sour relationships or even put your job at risk. But resolving them in a way that satisfies everyone involved will help further your organization's goals and position you as one of its go-to people for solving problems.

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