From The Director

Greetings!

In this issue of The Well-Practiced Manager, we discuss disagreement and conflict – what the difference is between them – and how to handle them.

We sometimes hear our University community described as a ‘culture of nice.’ Being nice doesn’t exclude one from conflict. There are ways of working through differences.

We counsel managers to clarify their own thinking when they are involved in a disagreement. This can be as simple as taking a breather, going outside for a brief walk or taking a few minutes to organize your thoughts. Refreshing your brain and your outlook and focusing on what is important will help anyone to manage disagreements and avoid conflict.

From time to time, we all face conflict that we did not invite nor anticipate. In these difficult situations, please contact Human Resources to tap into our experience in handling these circumstances. There are few situations that are

Managing Disagreements and Conflict

How do you respond to disagreement?

a) I go on high alert
b) I quickly back down
c) I have brain freeze

Signs of disagreement

When disagreement is present, there are at least two different opinions in the room and this can make us feel uncomfortable. We’ve been socialized to think that when we have agreement we are getting along with people and when we have disagreement we are not. Most of us have fine-tuned our internal warning signs to tell us disagreement (or danger) is present, regardless of whether it is verbalized. Body language, volume, and tone inform us even more than spoken words.

Disagreement can be good

So much of our work life is played out on fast forward. When disagreement emerges it is helpful to slow up the process and consider much more carefully what is happening:

• What are the different points of view?
• What do I want to have happen? What do others want?
• What is the framework (and boundaries) for this discussion?
• Is all the information on the table?

Disagreement can lead to conflict

Disagreement is less contentious than conflict. Conflict has more heat, passion, emotion, and physical action. When conflict is in full bloom, people can be loud, negative, lose their poise, gesture dramatically, shut down emotionally, or leave the room. No one wants to be in a conflict.

The good news is that by effectively managing our disagreements we will have fewer conflicts.
Don’t run and don’t fight
For many of us, the “fight or flight” response is all too familiar. Disagreement is tough to handle. Few of us have a high comfort level with disagreement—we notice it and we worry about it. That’s because we mistakenly believe there is a winner and a loser to every disagreement. No one wants to be the loser.

Don’t freeze up
There is a third response to disagreement: brain freeze. This third alternative sits somewhere between fight and flight and it locks up our thinking. Uncertainty causes us to forget logic and reason and be speechless.

Be curious; explore the territory
Here is a fourth alternative to consider: respond to any disagreement with an attitude of curiosity and openness:
- “Help me to understand your position.”
- “Are there some examples of how this would work?”
- “What are the benefits of this idea?”
- “How would we implement this?”
- “Tell me more; I am interested in your perspective.”

None of these comments are confrontational—they show your genuine curiosity at work. You are exploring the territory and seeking more information. Any tension present in the interaction is immediately reduced, allowing the disagreement to become a mutually respectful discussion.

Be clear
In Stephen Covey’s book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Successful People*, he writes that we should “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.” Once you have invited and encouraged others to share their views, your own views can be more fully heard and considered. Step into that opening you have created; this is not the time to be silent. Express what you believe to be true without critiquing others. Speak with confidence as you explain your perspective.

Watch your (body) language
Learn how to present or accept opposing ideas without an emotional charge of some kind. Emotions subtly seep into our facial expression and alter our usual speech patterns, resulting in a contradictory message. Monitor and screen your emotions so they do not betray you.

Be mindful of roles, responsibilities, history, and expertise
Each one of us is unique—and that’s wonderful! It’s also what makes life challenging and occasionally difficult. In any disagreement, we can predict that it’s not a level playing field. Someone has greater knowledge; someone has accountability on the issue; someone has a wise perspective or a good resource or an imaginative thought that could contribute in a major way to the shared pool of information.

Expect disagreement
It’s not realistic to see disagreement as a challenge to you. It is merely a contrasting opinion. Resolving disagreements is not about who is loudest, or who argues for the longest period of time. Forget arguing and forget trying to dominate others. Work toward a resolution that is the best possible outcome for all.

Expect different points of view and really listen to them. You are learning something important: another way to think about the issue.

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new to us and we are able to help you think through each step of what you do and say.

Embracing different ways of thinking and approaching situations offers a new kind of diversity in our workday. Creative solutions are often found at the end of a robust and honest discussion.

As the holiday season approaches, we extend our warm wishes to all.

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