Managing a Polarized Workforce

How to foster debate and promote trust

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Much has been written on the benefits for teams and organizations of engaging with opposing views, fostering productive disagreement, and creating “teams of rivals.” Yet anyone who has been involved in such work knows that disagreements on strongly held opinions, often related to personal identity, are always tough and frequently destructive. That’s truer today than ever before, as topics from the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements to environmentalism and remote work have elevated both the need for thoughtful discussion and the desire to avoid it. In a 2021 survey we found that conflict is an inescapable part of work life for employees at all levels. Eighty-nine percent of the 486 U.S. respondents from a wide range of companies and industries reported experiencing it at work to some degree. They spend about 3.5 hours a week, on average, dealing with it.

**IDEA IN BRIEF**

**THE PROBLEM**
Given heightened tensions over politics and movements such as #MeToo and Black Lives Matter, polarization in the workplace is worse than ever before. Fostering passionate debate and preserving collaboration and trust seem like an impossible mission.

**THE ROOT CAUSE**
Many leaders—and people in general—have misconceptions about the psychology of disagreement, causing them to avoid discussions on contentious topics rather than try to engage.

**THE SOLUTION**
Organizations can train people to defuse their fears of disagreeing with others, cultivate a mindset that’s open to hearing and trying to understand opposing opinions, and pick their words carefully in discussions. Leaders can also foster an overall culture that encourages receptiveness to colleagues with differing points of view.

One of the most difficult challenges leaders of all organizations face is managing diverse perspectives.
So, what can leaders do? How can they meet the challenge of fostering passionate debate while preserving collaboration and trust? Drawing from work we’ve conducted with scholars in psychology, sociology, and management, we offer advice on approaching disagreements more productively and training employees at all levels to better communicate about divisive topics. Only 39% of our survey respondents reported being trained or coached in handling workplace conflict. Among those who were, as part of a leadership development program or executive coaching, 96% said it helped them deal with conflict more effectively, 73% said it made them feel more confident and comfortable engaging in disagreements, and 62% felt they were able to turn potentially destructive conflicts into productive ones.

What We Get Wrong About Conflict

Many management and psychology self-help books suggest that defensiveness and ego threat play a major role in conflict escalation. The prescribed solutions usually involve checking one’s ego at the door—advice that people have a very hard time following. It could be that their egos (or insecurities) are just too big. But a larger problem is that the advice is not very helpful. Indeed, it is founded on three common myths.

**MYTH 1**
People who disagree with us do so because they are uninformed or unintelligent. When we encounter disagreement, a common impulse is to assume that we know the facts and the other person doesn’t. But in reality, each of us tends to focus on the facts that support our beliefs and dismiss or devalue those that don’t. Human minds have a hard time processing contradictory information but easily make connections to familiar ideas. That’s not because of insecurity or ego threat; it’s simply a limitation of our processing capacity. Evidence that supports our prior beliefs is easier to notice and remember—it “fits.” Over time our views crystallize around a set of familiar ideas supported by members of our professional networks, the news outlets we follow, the leaders we admire, and the politicians we support. We overlook or forget evidence that backs up opposing perspectives because we encounter it less frequently and it doesn’t jibe with our mental picture. People on both sides of a disagreement may be equally well-informed but with different information.

As the years pass, the views of those with different life experiences drift further apart, until people inhabit completely different mental realities. They believe ever more firmly that their views are uniquely based in incontrovertible evidence, solid logic, and self-evident truths, and they have increasing trouble grasping what exactly underpins the other side’s beliefs. Parents have difficulty relating to or even understanding the experiences of nonparents. Union members think their struggles and hard work should be apparent to management. Employees of color are angry when organizations seem to do little to increase diversity and inclusion. The result: Differences that could be a source of new ideas and productivity frequently lead to conflict as people attribute the disagreement to the other side’s failure to see seemingly obvious facts.

**MYTH 2**
Disagreement will make people defensive. When one of us (Julia) and her colleague Charlie Dorison examined the emotions that people report when talking to someone they strongly disagree with, they found a pattern: high levels of anger, irritation, and disgust. People think their opponents—not they themselves—are feeling insecure, threatened, and anxious. And when those opponents reject their arguments, people assume it’s because admitting they were wrong would be too damaging to their egos or too threatening to their view of the world. Such perceptions allow us to feel superior and give us an excuse to avoid the hard work of trying to understand one another. They also lead to irrational thinking. In a series of studies that Julia conducted with colleagues, more than three-quarters of those who expected to debate a controversial issue predicted that they would win. That’s mathematically impossible, of course.

**MYTH 3**
Disagreement is bad. Most of us think of conflict as negative and go to great lengths to avoid it. Consider a 2021 survey in which we asked 656 employees about the role of
conflict in their professional lives. Nearly 60% described disagreements at work as moderately, very, or extremely unpleasant. More than a third said they preferred to avoid them, and more than 40% thought they were destructive to their professional relationships and productivity. But much research finds the opposite: Disagreement, when managed well, gets greater results than avoidance does. It can spur better ideas, creativity, and innovation, helping businesses gain a competitive edge. (The key phrase is “when managed well,” which requires knowledge of the strategies we will go on to discuss and the discipline to consistently use them.)

Part of the reason we expect disagreement to lead to disaster is that we assume the people on the other side won’t listen with an open mind. When considering those who hold opposing views, we often rely on stereotypes, convincing ourselves that their positions are extreme caricatures of what they really are. Psychologists call this false polarization. In a recent survey by More in Common, a group dedicated to strengthening societies against social division, fewer than 20% of Democrats agreed that most police officers are bad people, but Republicans thought that more than half of them would agree. False polarization makes people expect that discussing a contentious topic with someone holding a different view will be highly unpleasant and largely pointless. That belief often makes them dread or avoid such conversations.

Because of these myths, leaders tend to focus on skirting disagreement or seeking compromise to make it disappear, and employees follow suit. But if disagreements on important issues are not handled successfully, problems fester, effective communication is inhibited, and important views are squelched. To build true collaboration, leaders must empower people to deal productively with opposing views. We offer four high-level strategies and a number of practical steps to achieve that goal.

**Defuse Fears of Disagreeing with Others**

When asked about recent disagreements they have faced, leaders in our executive education classes are quick to mention personality clashes, intense conflict about decisions, and heated exchanges that ruined relationships. Because most of us find engaging with differing views to be unpleasant, we tend to exit the situation and try to forget it as quickly as possible. Few of us carefully analyze difficult conversations in pursuit of better conflict-management strategies going forward. However, learning about disagreement can help us welcome and manage it in future interactions. Here are some ways to foster such understanding.

Realize that disagreement probably won’t feel as bad as you think. On January 20, 2017, the day Donald Trump was sworn in as president of the United States, Julia and colleagues asked people who had voted for Hillary Clinton how they expected to feel while watching the inauguration. The respondents anticipated extreme anger, disgust, and sadness. But in reality their reactions were not nearly that negative. In the following months, when the researchers asked liberals to listen to speeches by Senator Ted Cruz and conservatives to listen to ones by Senator Bernie Sanders after both groups predicted how they would feel, they found that people consistently overestimated their negative reactions. Participants had expected the emotional equivalent of a root canal but experienced something more like getting their braces tightened—unpleasant but not awful. By recognizing that disagreements are likely to be less upsetting than we think, we can learn to approach conflict willingly and eventually experience the benefits of engaging with opposing views.

Leaders who understand this can coach employees to hold productive conversations with those with opposing views. Consider the approach taken by Braver Angels, a nonpartisan organization we studied that conducts training and moderated debates designed to bring conservatives and liberals together in civil dialogue. In full-day workshops, equal numbers of Republican- and Democratic-leaning participants engage in a series of structured activities during which they are encouraged to express their emotions. In an exercise called Stereotypes, red and blue participants meet in separate rooms along with moderators and brainstorm negative stereotypes the other side has about them. They select five and discuss ways in which they are true or false. The groups then come together to share their reflections. They’re asked to listen to those from the other political party but not to question or challenge them. Because the discussion focuses on understanding rather than persuasion, it
avoids the high levels of frustration and anger that often accompany failed attempts at persuasion. Participants learn that those on the other side often have sensible reasons for their beliefs and that engaging with them doesn’t have to involve extreme negativity.

Seek points of agreement. In studies of the emotional experience of disagreement, Julia and colleagues asked participants what share of an opponent’s argument they were likely to agree or disagree with before they listened to it or read it. People generally overestimated disagreement and were pleasantly surprised by the amount of agreement. In our executive education classes we have found that teaching leaders how to find points of agreement with people who hold opposing views makes them more willing to engage with information from them. They don’t have a great time doing it, but they become better informed and are often struck by sound logic and admirable values behind their counterparts’ positions.

Sometimes looking for agreement means simply reminding people of the overarching goals that brought them together in the first place. Jenna Harrington, the head of patient services at Vertex Pharmaceuticals, told us of a time when severe weather delayed a shipment of medicine. As the team explored solutions, the debate grew contentious. Harrington got the discussion back on track by reminding people that they had a single goal, embraced by all but forgotten in the heat of the moment: patients’ well-being.

Direct your disagreement toward the task, not the person. “There is no learning without debate,” Pixar cofounder Ed Catmull told us. “It is by truly embracing disagreement and differences in perspectives that we make better decisions, because ideas get pressure-tested and challenged. But to be effective, conflict needs to be about the work, not the people.” Management research supports his view. A longitudinal study by Karen Jehn (then at the University of Pennsylvania) and Cornell’s Elizabeth Mannix...
found that high-performing teams had relatively low levels of personal conflict and high levels of disagreement about how to do their work. They had high levels of trust and respect and engaged in open discussions about possible approaches to their tasks.

A large pharmaceutical company that one of us (Francesca) studied trained midlevel managers to coach employees to focus on critiquing the current approach to the task in question. If the discussion in a meeting starts to stray, managers redirect it by saying, “We’re getting personal. Let’s refocus on the task.”

Teach People to Be Open-Minded

When confronted with a perspective contrary to their own, some people manage to keep an open mind, showcasing a skill we call receptiveness to opposing views. (To measure your own receptiveness, visit receptiveness.net). Receptive people are more likely than others to listen to arguments from both sides, think deeply about them, and evaluate them fairly. As a result, they form ideologically diverse friendships and professional networks. In a recent study of MBA students that Julia conducted with colleagues, only highly receptive students had social networks that included both liberal and conservative classmates. People who are open-minded in this way undoubtedly benefit from their access to varied sources of information, opportunities, and resources.

Cultivating a receptive mindset takes practice, but it is possible with the following tactics.

**Intentionally consider information from the opposing perspective.** Classic research in social psychology has demonstrated that telling people to be more objective in evaluating opposing views doesn’t work: People think they are already doing so. It’s more effective to advise them to carefully consider the reasons others hold the views they do. Similarly, the key to a receptive mindset is trying to view information through the eyes of its endorser. That requires us to forgo the easy path of dismissing people with different positions as unintelligent or nefarious while telling ourselves we have already exerted all the intellectual and emotional effort that can reasonably be expected. Receptiveness...
doesn’t require us to change our minds or tolerate views we find irrational or offensive. We can listen to arguments attentively, come to fully understand them, and still believe that we’re right. The ultimate goal is greater insight, mutual respect, and a willingness to collaborate.

The learning and development director at a global pharmaceutical company told us about its conflict resolution training module. “We teach participants to not get stuck on their views and to be curious about others’ perspectives,” he explained. “We ask them not to assume but to ask so that they can learn why a colleague sees things differently.” In the training module participants are paired up and asked to discuss a work issue they disagree about, over two rounds. In the first round they go into the conversation without guidance. In the second they’re asked to focus on what they might learn from their colleague and to think of questions that could help them understand their colleague’s perspective. “It’s a simple insight, but it fundamentally changed how I work with others,” one manager told us. “I feel I’ve been more effective by testing my assumptions rather than soaking in them when I disagree.”

Use the “listening triangle.” Conflict resolution professionals employ this technique, which is rooted in work on active listening, to help people get over the idea that they are intellectually superior to their opponents. It consists of three simple steps: Ask your opponent about his or her views, listen to the answer, and restate it in your own words to make sure you understand it correctly. Then repeat, starting with the same question or a highly similar one. People often think they understand a counterpart after hearing the answer to a single question. Asking it, or something like it, again is likely to unearth new information and reveal the reasoning behind your opponent’s perspective. By using the listening triangle, you can ensure that your assumptions about the reasons for someone’s beliefs are anchored in reality, not in your biases.

Some top companies have concluded that listening is good for business. Organizations including Pixar and the global automotive supplier Webasto offer training programs to help their people develop that skill. (For information on them and on the power of listening, see “Cracking the Code of Sustained Collaboration,” HBR, November—December 2019.)

Focus on learning. Although people generally approach disagreements hoping to persuade the other side, our research shows that it’s more helpful to go into them with the goal of learning and the assumption that our partners share that goal. When we focus on learning, we move away from judgment and are more open to understanding others’ experiences and views.

To coach our students to adopt learning goals during disagreements, we often use a technique based on research by the University of Chicago’s Jane Risen and colleagues. After someone shares an opinion you disagree with, thank him or her and acknowledge aspects of the view you appreciate; only then make your own argument. Compared with the common approach of immediately poking holes in the other person’s argument, this tack makes people feel more heard and valued. They perceive more common ground and find the conversation to be more collaborative.

Pick Your Words Carefully

Our research shows that we can signal a willingness to listen receptively through words that acknowledge the other person’s perspective and present our own view with humility and positivity. We reached this conclusion after developing a natural-language-processing algorithm to identify words and phrases that lead people to be perceived as receptive to another person’s point of view during a disagreement. Using the language identified by the algorithm helps people resolve conflicts more quickly and productively. Here’s how to foster receptive speech in your organization.

Coach people to use specific language. Our algorithm identified four techniques that convey receptiveness and can easily be employed in training programs (see the sidebar “How to Signal Receptiveness”).

→ Hedge your claims. Use words like “sometimes” and “often” to soften your assertions. Acknowledging room for doubt signals humility and a recognition that the other side might have a valid point. It also makes you sound less extreme and more thoughtful.

→ Emphasize agreement. Before jumping in with evidence to support your perspective, point out an area of agreement: “We both want a safer country where people are treated fairly.” That doesn’t mean compromising; it simply
means recognizing that there are many facets to any debate. Doing so improves the tone of the conversation.

→ **Acknowledge other perspectives.** Use phrases such as “I understand that you believe...” and “You told me that....” They show your partner that you actually heard him or her.

→ **Reframe your ideas in positive terms.** When talking with someone who opposes vaccination, you might say, “It’s really important that people get vaccinated so that we can all be safe from Covid-19” rather than declaring, “If people don’t get vaccinated, we will never be safe.” Using positive language establishes a constructive tone, and it’s likely that your counterpart will reciprocate.

When we talk about using receptive language, our students—MBAs and executives alike—raise two concerns. They worry about giving legitimacy to ideas they consider unacceptable. “Some things are simply not up for debate,” they say, “and no amount of discussion will make me change my mind.” And they note that we’re not used to hearing receptive language from prominent leaders. We think of powerful people as speaking firmly and confidently, whereas receptiveness strives to be engaging and inclusive. Could it harm one’s reputation as a leader?

We have found no basis for either concern. In one of our studies participants read a debate between a business owner and a city council member over restrictions intended to reduce the spread of Covid-19. We scripted the interaction so that the business owner made untrue and unethical arguments that would put public health at risk. We created two versions of the script. Some participants read a version in which the council member responded with counterarguments. The others read a version in which the council member used the same counterarguments but added a couple of sentences expressing receptiveness and a desire to engage. Participants were no more likely to side with the receptive council member than with the nonreceptive one. In other words, receptiveness did not legitimize bad ideas. More important, people thought the receptive council member was a better, more competent leader.
Students also ask us, What if all our efforts to engage constructively are met with renewed hostility and defensive-ness? Our advice: Keep your emotions under control and try again to engage in a receptive fashion, using the approaches we’ve described. With most people, such efforts will succeed. But sadly, in some instances you can’t break through. If you find it impossible to connect and the conversation is becom-ing more confrontational, your only option is to withdraw before the discussion escalates into full-blown conflict.

Foster a Culture That Encourages Tolerance

Building on the ways to cultivate a receptive mindset and get everyone in their companies to use more-receptive language, leaders can take additional steps to make their organizational cultures more tolerant and less divisive.

Leverage women. Our research shows that women tend to naturally exhibit conversational receptiveness. Without instruction or training, they spontaneously use the kind of language our algorithm identified. This insight has two implications: When feasible, assign women to lead conversations on contentious topics. And if training time and resources are scarce, focus your receptiveness training on men.

Establish a receptive tone at the outset. People worry that making receptiveness the norm in an organization with a history of tolerating or promoting destructive confrontation is easier said than done. Changing such a culture does take work—but it’s not impossible. In fact, receptiveness (or a lack thereof) is contagious. In our studies we have found that communicators naturally emulate one another’s tone, picking up on words and phrases that signal receptiveness or close-mindedness and adopting them in their replies. This means that a given style of conflict communication can spread throughout a team via meetings and emails. Setting the right tone at the start can “seed” receptiveness for the rest of the conversation. Leading off with a confrontational tone can initiate a destructive spiral.

Be a role model. Leaders who want others to share their attitudes and embrace their goals are better off demonstrating intellectual humility and using receptive language than sticking to the old confrontational script. Jenna Harrington, the Vertex Pharmaceuticals executive we cited earlier, is careful to thank people who challenge her in meetings. That kind of openness builds a culture of psychological safety, whereby people feel comfortable asking questions and acknowledging mistakes to the benefit of organizational performance.

As organizations grow more diverse and global, and as communication becomes less formal, leaders must be ready to engage with conflict arising not only from the tasks at hand but also from the varying ideologies, life experiences, and cultural traditions that employees bring to work. The strategies we’ve suggested enhance communication, de-escalate negative emotions, and build trust. Honing these skills takes time and practice—but the resulting decrease in frustration and negativity is well worth the effort.

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