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How to Disagree Without Being Disagreeable

I once had an interesting lunch conversation with a successful female business leader here in Dallas. We discussed how difficult it can be for some women to voice a difference of opinion in a way that will be well-received (i.e., not too assertive). On the other hand, saying nothing can have negative consequences of its own (i.e., being viewed as not assertive enough).

So, if you've found yourself waffling back and forth about whether to speak up or bite your tongue, read on.

1. **Don't be a derailer**
   I want you to think back to a time when you sat in a meeting thinking to yourself, "I don't agree with the direction we are heading in" and then you didn't say a word. Perhaps you thought it was the wrong forum in which to voice your concerns.

   What was the impact of your choice? Did you catch people off guard by not speaking up in that moment and later sharing privately that you had major concerns? Regardless of your intent, how were you viewed? Did some think you were being passive-aggressive or maybe not assertive enough? Others may have thought, "Why didn't she just say something when we were all there? It could have saved us a lot of time."

   Also keep in mind that you may not be the only person with concerns, so speaking up may help you and others get it all on the table. And remember that you can express a different point of view right then and there without turning it into a big deal. For example, if your concerns will warrant a lot more discussion, you can suggest an offline discussion with a smaller group if that makes sense. The next two strategies below might also help.

2. **Frame your disagreement as "Yes and…"**
   Before you highlight points of concern, acknowledge areas of alignment. By first demonstrating that you "get it" (i.e., that you understand the other person's point of view and what could work well) others will be more open to your perspective.

   Some people fall into the trap of jumping straight into what they think won't work, which can trigger defensiveness – and then they entirely forget to point out what they DO like about the idea. So, challenge yourself to say, "Yes and…" instead of "No, but…"

3. **Depersonalize your comments**
   Finally, remember to keep it objective by evaluating each idea against the intended outcomes. In other words, point out the criteria for success (stated or implied) and help others understand how the ideas on the table do or don't satisfy them. This makes the evaluation of the ideas feel much less personal, and the originator of the idea is less likely to feel attacked when you give your feedback. By framing your suggestions in the context of the group's objectives, others will be more receptive to what you have to say.

Sometimes saving your disagreement for another time is indeed the best option. But in many cases, it may not be. See if you can work through some issues more quickly using the strategies above, and consider the impact on how you're viewed as a leader. So, before you move on with your day, take a minute to identify one step you'll take to put this content into play this week.

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Neena Newberry is an award-winning executive coach, speaker, and author. A recognized leader in her field, she has appeared on CBS, ABC, Fox News, Fortune Magazine and others over 50 times and received four Stevie Awards for Women in Business. A former Deloitte executive, Neena excels at simple solutions to accelerate business and career results. Subscribe to THE EDGE℠, Neena's weekly blog, and connect with her on LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook.