



Expressing disagreement: the pitfalls to avoid

The challenge

Expressing disagreement is never comfortable, either because people don't want to be perceived as displeasing or offending, or because they fear they might not be convincing. Some people thus prefer to remain silent. Others only half express themselves, at the risk of not being understood, while yet others end up thrusting their opinion on others, triggering a defensive reaction where listening becomes impossible. Knowing how to express diverging views is nonetheless essential to ensure the quality of decisions and to develop relations based on trust that allow for constructive debates.

Three pitfalls to avoid

Knowing how to express disagreement means being able to present one's point of view in such a way that the other is willing to hear it, understand it and take it into consideration. That means avoiding three main traps:

 Lacking clarity	To avoid annoying someone, you might be tempted to beat around the bush, to the point of being confusing. This means risking not being understood or even provoking suspicion.	• Remember that you have the right to disagree: don't apologize; remain confident. • Don't "evade the issue": avoid ambiguous terms, explain the reasons for your disagreement with precision, go straight to the point rather than multiplying arguments. • Give the real reasons for your disagreement. False arguments can only endanger your credibility. • Anticipate objections to avoid being thrown off balance and giving up defending your point of view, thereby giving the impression that you agree with the person.
 Being aggressive	Feeling uneasy can easily lead you to express yourself bluntly. This risks creating personal conflict, which would be detrimental, as a person who is on the defensive is unlikely to listen to you.	• Expect reaction: it is normal that the person feels annoyed by your disagreement, yet it doesn't mean that conflict is inevitable. • Choose your words carefully to avoid hurting the person you are talking to. Don't hesitate to prepare your arguments in writing, and even test them beforehand with someone you can trust. • Criticize ideas or actions, and not the person. For example, avoid "You're forgetting that..." and try "This project doesn't take into account..." • Be respectful: avoid being in any way aggressive, don't interrupt, etc.
 Digging in	When trying to defend your ideas, you may easily end up closing the door to any real dialogue. As a result, the discussion stalls, and each person sticks firmly to his or her position...	• Avoid being too categorical. Don't try to promote your solution at any cost: a better option may emerge from the confrontation of your respective opinions. • Try to understand what your counterpart is feeling before trying to get him/her to accept your point of view. In particular, don't hesitate to speak of the frustrations that your disagreement may cause. • Listen to his/her arguments. Ask questions, reformulate his/her words, ask for additional explanations: you will gain in credibility if you can show that you have clearly understood what you are expressing disagreement about.