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## **ARTICLE** **CONFLICT**

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*by Amy Gallo*

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Kieran Stone/Getty Images

When I worked as a management consultant, I had a client that I thought of as difficult. Let's call her Marguerite. She and I didn't see eye to eye on much. I disagreed with the direction she was taking our project, the people she chose to involve, and the pace at which she thought we should do our work (*why did she need to go so slow?*). But because she was the client, and I was just starting out in my career, I didn't think it was my place to openly disagree with her. Instead, I forwarded every email she sent me to one of my colleagues and complained about how Marguerite was making bad

decisions and not heeding my vague, and likely passive-aggressive, suggestions that we try different approaches.

One day, instead of forwarding the email, I hit reply. I thought I was complaining to my coworker but I was actually sending Marguerite a direct email about what a pain I felt she was. About 15 seconds after I pressed send, I realized what I had done and thought, “I’m going to be fired.” Thinking it’d be better to get it over with quickly, I walked over to my boss’s desk and fessed up. To my surprise, he didn’t get mad or threaten to send me packing. He simply said, “Go apologize.”

Marguerite’s office was 30 blocks north of ours, in Midtown Manhattan. My boss suggested I stop at the florist on my way. For a moment, I contemplated whether being fired would be preferable to having to face Marguerite and what I’d done, but he was right. And when I showed up in Marguerite’s office with an inappropriately large bouquet, she laughed. To her credit, she told me it happens and that she preferred that the next time I disagree with her, I just tell her so that we could talk about it. It was generous and helpful advice.

I’d like to think that the way I behaved with Marguerite was entirely attributable to my lack of experience — but in the years since then, what I’ve observed in research and interviews about conflict at work is that most people don’t want to disagree or know how to do it. In fact, we’ve come to equate saying “I see it differently” or “I don’t agree” with being angry, rude, or unkind, so it makes most people horribly uncomfortable.

To be fair, agreeing is usually easier than confronting someone, at least in the short run. And it feels good when someone nods at something we say, or admits, “I see it the exact same way.” That’s what I wanted Marguerite to do. And rather than accepting that she saw things differently from me, I labeled her “difficult.” This was a mistake — and not just because I ended up embarrassing myself. By thinking that way, I lost out on a potentially productive working relationship. Imagine how much better the project could’ve gone had I openly and respectfully disagreed with Marguerite.

Disagreements are an inevitable, normal, and healthy part of relating to other people. There is no such thing as a conflict-free work environment. You might dream of working in a peaceful utopia, but it wouldn’t be good for your company, your work, or you. In fact, disagreements — when managed well — have lots of positive outcomes. Here are a few.

**Better work outcomes.** When you and your coworkers push one another to continually ask if there’s a better approach, that creative friction is likely to lead to new solutions. “Conflict allows the team to come to terms with difficult situations, to synthesize diverse perspectives, and to make sure solutions are well thought-out,” says Liane Davey, cofounder of 3COze Inc. and author of *You First: Inspire Your Team to Grow Up, Get Along, and Get Stuff Done*. “Conflict is uncomfortable, but it is the source of true innovation, and also a critical process in identifying and mitigating risks.” And there’s rarely a fixed amount of value to be gained in a disagreement. If you and your colleague are arguing about the best way to roll out a new initiative — he wants to launch in a single market first and you

want to enter several at one time — you’ll be forced to explore the pros and cons of each approach and ideally find the best solutions.

**Opportunities to learn and grow.** As uncomfortable as it may feel when someone challenges your ideas, it’s an opportunity to learn. By listening and incorporating feedback, you gain experience, try new things, and evolve as a manager. When a peer chews you out after an important presentation because you didn’t give her team credit for their work, the words may sting, but you’re more likely to think through everyone’s perspectives before preparing your next talk.

**Improved relationships.** By working through conflict together, you’ll feel closer to the people around you and gain a better understanding of what matters to them and how they prefer to work. You’ll also set an important precedent: that it’s possible to have “good” fights and then move on. My 10-year-old daughter knows this intuitively. She once came back from a sleepover with her close friend, and when I asked her how it went, she said, “Great. We fought the whole time.” I pressed her about how it could’ve been fun when they were arguing. She said, “Because we got over it and now we’re BFFs.”

**Higher job satisfaction.** When you’re not afraid to constructively disagree about issues at work, you’re likely to be happier to go to the office, be satisfied with what you accomplish, and enjoy interactions with your colleagues. Instead of feeling as if you have to walk on eggshells, you can focus on getting your work done. Research supports this: [A study of American and Chinese employees](#) in China showed a correlation between the use of certain approaches to conflict management — ones in which employees pursue a win-win situation, care for others, and focus on common interests — and an employee’s happiness at work.

**A more inclusive work environment.** If you want to have diversity and inclusion in your organization, you have to be prepared to disagree. Anesa Parker, Carmen Medina, and Elizabeth Schill wrote in their Rotman Management article, “[Diversity’s New Frontier: Diversity of Thought](#),” that “While homogenous groups are more confident in their performance, diverse groups are often more successful in completing tasks.” They went on to explain that managers and employees need to get over an “instinctual urge to avoid conflict” and abandon “the idea that consensus is an end in and of itself. In a well-run diverse team, substantive disagreements do not need to become personal: Ideas either have merit and posits of connection or they do not.”

I couldn’t agree more, especially on another point they make: that managers have an obligation to design conflicts that allow their teams to be creative and productive. Put simply, we have to learn how to disagree more, and managers need to take responsibility for making it comfortable and OK for people to dissent, debate, and express their true opinions.

If you’re a [conflict-averse person](#), I realize that reading this might leave you squirming in your chair. The good news is that it’s entirely possible to get more comfortable with conflict. Here are some ways to start.

**Let go of needing to be liked.** Most people want people to like them. That’s normal. Joel Garfinkle, an executive coach and author of *Difficult Conversations*, recently [wrote](#), “While it’s natural to want to be liked, that’s not always the most important thing.” He goes on to say that instead of trying to increase your likability, focus on respect — both giving it and earning it. “Even when the subject matter is difficult, conversations can remain mutually supportive. Respect the other person’s point of view, and expect them to respect yours,” he says. If you model that you’re comfortable and that respect is more important than likability, you’ll model for your team that it’s OK to disagree, making it safer to people to raise their ideas. (I admit that this can be tricky advice to follow, particularly for women, as [research suggests](#).)

**Focus on the big picture.** Disagreements are hard when you think of them as personal jabs, but [conflicts at work usually start as differences over objectives or process](#). Amy Jen Su, managing partner of [Paravis Partners](#) and coauthor of *Own the Room*, suggests focusing on something other than the potential damage a disagreement can do to your relationship. Instead, she says, [think about the business needs](#): Why is your difference of opinion an important debate to have? How will it help the organization, your team, or the project you’re working on? Wanting to be liked is about *you*; wanting what’s best for the business or the team is far less selfish.

**Don’t equate disagreement with unkindness.** When I talk with people who are afraid of conflict, and I ask why they are hesitant to disagree, I most often hear, “I don’t want to hurt her feelings” or “I don’t want to be a jerk.” Yes, there are some people who genuinely don’t want to be disagreed with ([insecure managers](#), for example), but most people are open to hearing a different perspective if you share it thoughtfully and respectfully. Ask yourself: Is there really a risk that you will hurt your coworker’s feelings or that they’ll think you’re a jerk? Or are you projecting your own discomfort?

**Find a role model and emulate them.** Chances are there’s someone in your life — a colleague, a relative, or a friend — who does a pretty good job of being direct and honest about their thoughts and opinions without ruffling feathers. Watch that person. See what they do. And then try to emulate them. One of my colleagues recently told me that when she’s in a tense situation, she pretends that she’s an actor who is skilled at dealing with discomfort. She says that lets her observe her behavior from a distance rather than being mired in the rawness of her emotions at the moment. This is in the “[fake it until you make it](#)” vein that London Business School’s [Herminia Ibarra](#) recommends using. If you’re not good at dealing with tense conversations, try on the persona of someone who is.

Whichever tactic you decide to try, practice in small doses. Be direct in a low-stakes conversation and see what happens. Chances are it will go better than you expect. And if it doesn’t, you can learn from the situation and try again.

As I accidentally learned with my email faux pas with Marguerite, sometimes disagreeing is exactly what the other person wishes you would do — as long as you do it with respect and empathy.

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