

Three Ways to Build Connection Even When you Disagree

With Martha Lasley

Leading a workshop on conflict resolution, I said, "Sometimes people just want to vent. When you give them a chance to be heard, you can actually prevent conflict."

My co-facilitator gave me a nod of affirmation, "Yes, I've seen that happen," then turned to the participants and said, "and there's some recent research that shows that venting tends to escalate the conflict. So use your intuition and notice the underlying intention before you encourage venting."

My partner disagreed with me in front of a group, but few people recognized it as a disagreement because she knew how to express her opposition without stimulating distress in me or others.

Had she openly disagreed with me, she may have earned respect for her expertise. More often though, the energy becomes blocked, someone attempts to rescue the perceived victim, or people begin taking sides.

On the other hand, when people withhold their opinion and refuse to embark on healthy disagreement, it can be much less productive than expressing it with an eye on win-win solutions. So here are some ways to disagree in harmony when you're working with a group or even in one-on-one coaching sessions.

Build Connection Using "Yes, and..."

Instead of refuting each other, you can use the techniques of improvisational actors who continuously build on what's been said. Often referred to as, "Yes, and..." this cornerstone process of improvisation can bring more flow and help you stay connected. If you find yourself in a disagreement, don't waste your time counting to ten. Instead, take a few moments to find a point of agreement.

Here's an example from the same workshop. "Let's take a break," my partner said just when I wanted to add a point to the discussion.

Everybody likes to take a break so I said, "Absolutely, we all need a break", then added, "and before we do, there's one more thing I want to say." Without making her wrong, I completely disagreed with her.

You'll find many ways to agree before you disagree if you look for something to acknowledge. Almost always, you can agree with part of what has been said. Consider using some of these phrases to segue into your opposing opinion:

- *Yes, and...The part that resonates with me is...*
- *I appreciate your insight and here's another perspective to explore...*
- *Sure, and...*
- *What I love about what you just said is...*

What if the other person says something very different from your perception of the truth that you completely disagree? I assert that you can still find something to agree with. Respect their truth. A simple yes will suffice. Or acknowledge something about what they've just said, such as:

- *Now I understand where you're coming from...*

- *I'm inspired by your passion...*
- *I appreciate your viewpoint*
- *You really care about this topic...*
- *I can see you value...*
- *Sounds like you want....*

Empathy goes a long way. Consider saying, "This is really important to you, isn't it?" It's a simple way to start building from "yes."

Kick "Buts"

Once you've acknowledged the opposing viewpoint, don't destroy the connection you've established by using the word "but." "I see where you're coming from, but..." negates the statement you just made.

It's amazing how quickly the word "but" can wipe out rapport and foster defensiveness. People automatically feel like they aren't being heard. Like a broken record, they reiterate their opinion, fruitlessly searching for an endorsement.

So kick the "but" habit. Practice "kicking butts" with your friends and then move on to more difficult encounters. Words like "however", "yet" and "although" can be just as stifling to healthy disagreement.

If someone says, "That's true, but we haven't looked at the marketing reports!" It's very different from "That's true, and once we look at the marketing reports we'll be able to integrate your ideas into our plan." Using the word "and" instead of "but" can foster an atmosphere of agreement and collaboration.

Change the Way you Think

To hold respect for another's opinion seems simple. You can pat yourself on the back for controlling what comes out of your mouth. The problem is that your body is a mirror of your thoughts and people get the gist of what you're thinking anyway. So the real challenge is not only to control what comes out of your mouth, but to take control of your thoughts. This isn't always easy because it means choosing stop judging and look for ways to honor, understand, and have compassion for others.

One way to honor another's opinion is to avoid anything that implies that you are a better judge than they themselves are. Avoid giving orders, making threats, moralizing or giving advice. Another thing to avoid is anything that puts people down. This includes criticizing, passing judgment, ridiculing, blaming, and name calling.

To stop putting others down, begin with yourself. Your own internal critic can be damaging and the most difficult to muzzle. When you take control of the internal chatter and stop trashing yourself, all that practice will make it a lot easier to honor the opinions of others.

In Part II we'll talk about how to use "yes, and" when you are horrified by what someone says!