

Arguing to Win vs. Arguing to Understand

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Most people are worried about looking good rather than making the right decision. This is one reason teams struggle to have vigorous, yet healthy debates.

One of the greatest communication superpowers is the ability to argue forcefully and honestly, while still showing respect and admiration for the other side. This is rare. It's not a natural occurrence. Most people are either too aggressive and harsh or too passive and soft. There's a balance you need to find.

That balance comes down to "Arguing to Understand" rather than "Arguing to Win."

Understanding this difference enables honest disagreement while still enhancing relationships.

It's a shift in perspective that allows teams to debate forcefully yet calmly versus arguing with unrestrained emotion and ego.

Everyone likes to feed their egos. Any discussion, whether between 2 people or 20, gives us the chance to boost our ego by showing how smart we are. Wise decisions are not made by showing off. Instead, they are made after honest, deliberate, and disagreeable discussions. The only way to do that is to stop worrying about how smart you look and start worrying about how much you can learn.

Discussions go wrong when we forget we are there to learn, not compete.

When we argue with ego, we are on the attack. We look for the first sign of weakness, ready to pounce on the opponent's slightest mistake and revel in our superiority. While this makes us feel good, it sabotages our relationship and reputation with others. As you push harder to win, the other side just digs in, impervious to even the most compelling argument. Humans aren't computers. You don't win through logic.

Arguing to win poisons the entire company. It turns everyone into skeptical, cautious bystanders, not wanting to risk the emotional baggage or wasted time of ego-induced tirades.

A better way is to "Argue to Understand." Stop worrying about looking good, only about getting to the right decision. That starts by listening and learning from others. We don't have to "win" anything. Yes, you can still argue decisively for your side. But argue with the perspective that 1) you don't know everything, and 2) the other side will teach you something.

If you want to show how smart you are, stop talking and listen. After the other side explains their argument, then you present your case. The discussion always remains focused on discovering the right answer, not winning.

Arguing to win or arguing with your ego is not intentional. It's just human nature. When we're in a group setting, there's a natural tendency to become competitive, defensive, and aggressive. We must overrule that initial response. It's easy to let our subconscious prioritize our ego at the expense of someone else.

Many leaders wonder, "Why can't I get more discussion and engagement out of my meetings? Why doesn't anyone speak up?"

The biggest reason is people are afraid, or more likely, disillusioned, that their ideas will be met with constructive debate. Instead, cheap, insulting attacks are the norm. These attacks take many forms, most of them very subtle: the eye-rolling, the attitude, the sarcastic reply, the dismissive body language, the underhanded personal insult.

It's up to the leader to monitor and eliminate these in the moment, not after the meeting. If teams can't trust one another, all substantive discussions are doomed.

As Jay Heinrichs, author of *Thank You for Arguing: What Aristotle, Lincoln, and Homer Simpson Can Teach Us About the Art of Persuasion*, states:

Go ahead and tell it like it is. But you cannot be indecorous and persuasive at the same time. The two are mutually exclusive...Deliberative argument is not about the truth, it's about choices...

You have a choice: you can be an asshole or get to the right decision. You can't have both, but you get to decide. It takes conscious effort to make the right call.

Narcissists are an extreme version of those who constantly argue to win. As Joe Navarro, author of *Dangerous Personalities: An FBI Profiler Shows You How to Identify and Protect Yourself from Harmful People*, states:

They [*Narcissists*] arrive late to meetings, parties, and family events, delaying activities, making others wait and even make sacrifices on their behalf. They may storm in or make dramatic entrances just to get everyone's attention. **They have no hesitation about letting you know they're the smartest person in the room.** Some are shameless name-droppers, habitually mentioning whom they know, whom they lunched with, and on and on, making sure you know that they associate with important people.

Robert Sutton, author of *The No Asshole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn't*, explains how these personalities destroy your team:

There are other insidious, but more subtle, ways that these bullies and jerks undermine performance. A hallmark of teams and organizations that are led by assholes, or where swarms of assholes run rampant, is that they are riddled with fear, loathing, and retaliation. In a fear-based organization, employees constantly look over their shoulders and constantly try to avoid the finger of blame and humiliation; even when they know how to help the organization, they are often afraid to do it.

Narcissistic behavior doesn't just go away. It will become a cancer if unchecked.

Unfortunately, many organizations have unintentionally devolved into a "everyone for themselves" environment. So of course, people take any chance to trash a colleague if it makes them look good.

Before the start of every meeting, the team should ask one another:

- Are you arguing because you want what's best for the other person/team?
- Are you trying to make them better?
- Are you trying to help?