

Disagreeing Without Being Disagreeable

Your project team wrangles over who will do what. Your secretary spends too much time making or taking personal calls. Your boss calls a meeting, then disappears. You disagree with a colleague on which software to buy. These conflicts, as well as many others, can be resolved amicably—and probably to your benefit—if you learn a few rules.

To advance your career, you must learn to handle workplace disagreements. When people fail on their jobs, many of their problems can be attributed to lacking interpersonal skills. Fortunately, there are ways you can learn to become as proficient at resolving people problems as you are at finding technical solutions.

The key to handling a conflict lies in how you approach it, not in the conflict itself. There are two extreme types in conflict resolution—warriors and avoiders. Warriors rant and rave—driving away everyone else or scaring them into submission. Avoiders, on the other hand, withdraw from conflict or just surrender. People develop poor approaches to conflict because very few of them have learned how to handle it.

In today's workplace, which values teamwork, desirable employees know how to disagree without being disagreeable. The next time you face a conflict with your colleague or boss, a vendor or contractor, try the following four-step method. You can use it to take a stand, set limits, raise an opposing point of view, question a decision, or handle any other conflict.

Conflict-solving steps

Imagine that your boss calls weekly update meetings for your project team, but then constantly goes in and out of the meet-

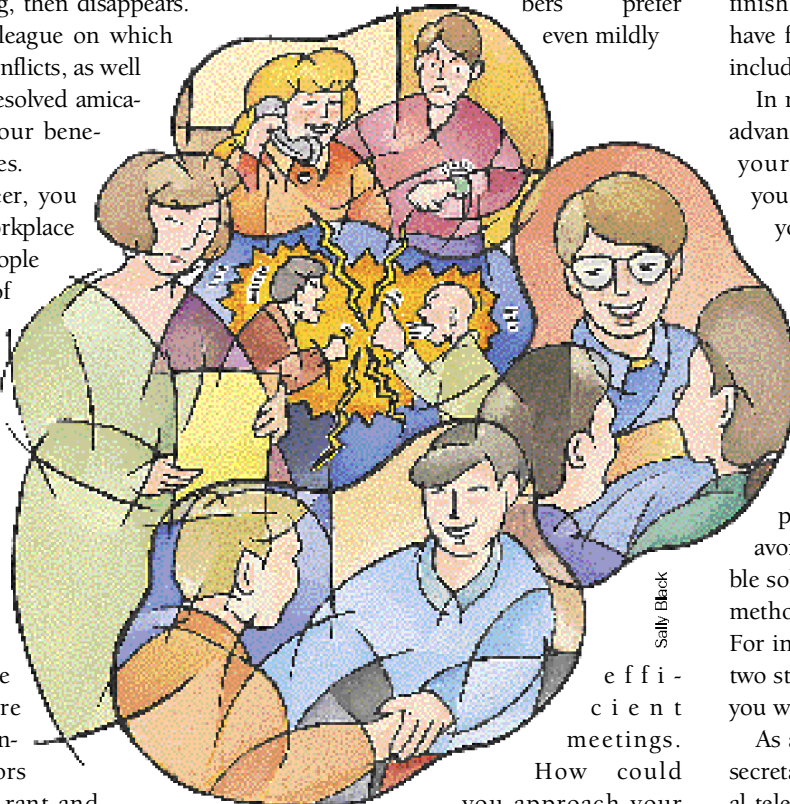
ings to handle other business. That stop-and-start approach could stimulate conflict in any group—especially if any of the members prefer even mildly

be willing to start early.”

4. Explain the consequences that could come from your solution. “I’ll bet we could finish our meetings in half the time and have fewer headaches down the road if we include your input.”

In real life, this method provides several advantages. First, you are less likely to blow your stack during a conflict, because you plan ahead—thinking through what you want to say about an existing conflict. Practicing this four-step method even helps with spontaneous conflicts, because you have a general plan, regardless of the specific conflict. Second, you do not add to every workplace's biggest energy drain—avoiding the issue. Third, you will become known as a problem solver, not a complainer or avoider, because you will generate possible solutions. Perhaps most important, this method is uncomplicated and very flexible. For instance, you could even skip the first two steps and begin with step 3—what it is you want.

As a second example, suppose that your secretary spends too much time on personal telephone calls. To handle this problem, begin by observing it over time, to verify that the problem exists. Then find a place and time when you can say, “I can't be sure, but as I pass your desk I seem to overhear you making nearly a dozen personal phone calls every day. It concerns me because I know that your computer work is backing up, and I need that big project by noon on Thursday. I'd appreciate it if you'd limit your personal calls to two or three a day. That way, you'll receive a good performance review next month, and your Thursday deadline will be less stressful.” Although your secretary may be angry or defensive, you can plan ahead to keep the conversation on track. You might say, “The norm in this office seems to be about three calls a day—unless there's an emergency, of course. What would it take for you to stick to that norm?”



Sally Black

efficient meetings.

How could you approach your

boss about this problem?

You could plan ahead and base your approach on the following four steps.

1. Describe what happened in a nonjudgmental tone of voice. You might say, “I noticed that you had four or five phone calls that pulled you away during the meeting we had yesterday.”

2. Explain the impact of the behavior on you, a customer, or anyone else associated with your team. “Your experience with this project will help us avoid lots of problems down the road. But I noticed that we kept making decisions without your input, because we couldn't afford to wait for you to come back.”

3. Specify what you want in observable, measurable terms. “How about scheduling our meetings for 7:30 a.m., before calls start coming in? I am sure that the others would

Tactful tips

No one is born knowing how to resolve conflict. We all must learn it. Although you should expect resistance from some of your co-workers, the following tips will make sure that your message gets heard.


- **Choose a good time and neutral place.** For instance, if you need to speak with your boss about an important issue, do not pick a time right before an important deadline, when your boss may be preoccupied. Instead, ask for an appropriate time on your boss's calendar, and suggest a place where you will not be disturbed. Also, be willing to accept "No" when you ask for an appointment, but then suggest another time.
- **Say what you want.** You will capture more attention by telling your colleagues what you want, rather than what you do not want. You might say, "Make this look perfect for the meeting," rather than "Don't

have any errors in this." As a basic rule, avoid the word "don't" in your conflict-handling comments.

- **Use a firm yet friendly tone of voice.** Maintain a professional atmosphere by keeping your voice calm and friendly—even if you do not feel that way inside. When you cannot keep calm, take a "time out" to cool down.
- **Listen first.** When you bring up a problem, the other person may feel justified in bringing one up, too. If that happens, put your side on hold and let the other person talk. Listen, and recognize that acknowledgment differs from agreement. If your boss complains about his problem of being in six places at once, you might say, "That must be very frustrating." You can acknowledge the feeling without agreeing that it is acceptable for your boss to repeatedly walk in and out of a meeting. Still, your comment builds rapport, and

then you can say, "Let me tell you what it's like from where I sit."

- **Lighten up.** Most problems seem less serious if you can laugh about them—especially if a joke comes at your own expense. Laughter lets people save face, which always makes people more cooperative. In fact, friendly jokes between two people enhance the odds of solving a conflict.

When you gain a reputation for resolving conflicts, your name will appear at the head of the list for choice assignments, departmental promotions, and annual bonuses. Remember, tact is the knack of making a point without making an enemy. 

Anne Baber of Lenexa, Kansas, and Lynne Waymon of Silver Spring, Maryland, are professional trainers. They can be reached at 1-800-352-2939.