

# The difficult encounter

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## Key learning points

- Display behaviours that make disagreements productive.
- Create an open, unbounded learning environment.
- Enable intellectual stimulation.
- Help emotional control.

## Introduction

As trainers, we are often dealing with ideas that are new to participants. It is, therefore, not surprising that we occasionally meet objections. It is also likely that, in a learning event, we will sometimes disagree with something a participant says. This article looks at ways to handle such situations.

## The basis of disagreement

Disagreement is a difference of opinion, and is healthy and natural. People don't disagree because they are disagreeable; they have a reason. Their reason may be one of these:

- Trainers' statements bump into learners' beliefs or vice

versa. It is important to recognise that *belief* is not *truth*, even if we believe something to be true. People's values and beliefs can be so strong that it is easy for them to take the thing that is said, or the way in which it is said, as the 'ism' that offends them: sexism, racism, ageism and so on.

- Trainers often make statements that are different from a participant's current way of thinking. Participants may become uncomfortable, and may object. Admittedly, some people may appear awkward because they like to be different. This is not a major issue, as learning events are inherently about change, and people who like difference normally like change.
- Different people operate with different chunk sizes. For example, if we are a *big chunker* and make generalisations, the *small chunker* may disagree because

they find what we say vague. Equally, if we are a *small chunker* and give detail, the *big chunker* will want that to be related to the big picture.

This can create an environment where it appears that there is a disagreement.

## Products of disagreement

There are both positive and negative products of disagreement. When we jointly solve a disagreement, our relationship becomes stronger. Some of the positive outcomes are new ideas, different perceptions, better ways of doing things, innovations, better use of resources and new skills. For learning, it is important to air the participants' disagreement concerning the trainer's statement.

On the negative side, if a disagreement is not handled well, it can degenerate into hostility, acquiescence or silent withdrawal, preventing the facilitation of learning.

Let's now take a look at an emotionally-based difficulty statement: 'I can't understand this'.

- 1 **Seek clarification** – 'Tell me the bit you don't understand.' The participant's potential response is 'It's **how** you ...'.
- 2 As a trainer, you can put yourself at the heart of the problem and **seek a proposal**: 'How can I help you understand how ...?'. The learner feels in control because you have not offered a solution, but involved them in the route to a solution. The emotion is quietened. The person who stated the problem knows you want to help.
- 3 **Thank** the person for raising the problem.
- 2 **State your feelings or emotion** – for example, 'I feel intimidated when you ...'. State the specific behaviour that caused the feeling – for example, sneered, shouted, swore, glared. Note the 'I' language.
- 3 **Describe the change you'd like** – for example, 'I should like you to explain the problem that I am creating'. The negative emotion is directed at the trainer, so accept the responsibility for creating it.
- 4 **Give the participant an incentive to change** their behaviour – for example, 'This will gain my respect and motivate me to help, or change, or to ... [do what is implicit or explicit in the participant's outburst]'.

## Handling an attack

When a participant disagrees, they may engage negative emotions and orally attack you or what you have said. To make the objection more productive, it is necessary to tackle the emotion and to encourage the person to put forward their view in a more productive way. The following pattern may help:

- 1 **Reflect the emotions that you observe** – for example, 'I can see that you feel strongly about this'. Reflecting the person's emotions is more likely to help the person control them than a command such as 'Calm down'. Commands often exacerbate the emotion and imply that you are in a more authoritative (parental) position.
- 1 **Pause**. This prevents you responding in kind.
- 2 **Be responsive and seek clarification**. 'Pull' behaviours sometimes reduce the attack.
- 3 **Make an assertive, low-key rebuttal and ask for a personal reasoning**. For example, 'I see it differently from that, Mike (use the person's name). I'd like to hear why you think ...'. The person may now feel listened to, and know there is a different way of seeing the situation. The ambiguity prevents your position from being attacked.

An alternative approach is as follows:

- 1 **Pause**. This prevents you responding in kind.
- 2 **Be responsive and seek clarification**. 'Pull' behaviours sometimes reduce the attack.
- 3 **Make an assertive, low-key rebuttal and ask for a personal reasoning**. For example, 'I see it differently from that, Mike (use the person's name). I'd like to hear why you think ...'. The person may now feel listened to, and know there is a different way of seeing the situation. The ambiguity prevents your position from being attacked.

- 4 **Ask, ask, and ask**. The person may be correct and feeling frustrated. They may be wrong, and their own explanation may enlighten them.

## Conclusion

It is OK for the trainer and participant to disagree, and that may prove invaluable in obtaining new, or better, ideas. An *objection* is not a *rejection*; it is simply a request for more information. Within a training environment, disagreement can be uncomfortable. If we refrain from permitting it to descend into hostility, we may learn something and keep our blood pressure down, at the same time.

If every participant thinks the same way, we run the risk of 'group think' and intellectual stagnation. When participants can disagree and clearly explain their ideas without negative emotions, they can have a positive impact on the communication process. When they disagree, they are more likely to engage in critical thinking, and are usually more satisfied with the decision they make.

The danger lies in handling disagreement badly and turning it to hostility or silent withdrawal. Hostility and withdrawal destroy communication and learning. The key to success is tolerance for disagreement, an important trainer skill.

## Authors

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Confronting and challenging



Communication within disagreements is a learned skill, using both verbal and non-verbal methods. Aspects of verbal communication are control of tone, pitch, speed and volume; and aspects of non-verbal communication are gestures, facial expressions and personal space. Crucial elements are the vocabulary and structure of the language used, and the assertive behaviour that expresses your own rights in a way that does not violate the rights of the other person. Some trainers find it difficult to challenge or confront assertively. This may lead to an individual taking a non-assertive approach, resulting in avoidance of the situation altogether, or being vague and hesitant. Alternatively, an aggressive approach may be taken, resulting in counter-aggression, submission or defensive behaviour. There are constructive ways of assertively challenging and confronting that maintain a healthy learning experience within the group. Aggression, avoidance and non-assertion are not effective confronting strategies.

Constructive disagreement

Constructive disagreement may be used when you want to disagree with someone in a way that allows your message to be listened to, whilst maintaining effective communication. It can also be

used as a counter to an objection. Let's look at a step-by-step approach.

- 1 The person has said something with which you disagree.
 

**Pause.** You have a decision to make. Do you disagree or let it go?
- 2 You decide to disagree.
 

**Think.** What exactly am I disagreeing with? Is it the content, the implication, the inherent values, or the way it was said?
- 3 **Seek clarification** of what the person has said. The clarification may illuminate or dissolve the disagreement.
- 4 **Listen.** We all listen in different ways and apply our own interpretation of the other person's message. (See Issue 20, *It's good to listen*, by Johnson and Geal.)
- 5 **Be clear about the outcome** you want to achieve. It is a valuable rule that, if you know exactly the outcome you want to achieve from an interaction, and you treat the other person with consideration, the right words come out.
- 6 **Identify something that you agree with** in what the person has said and tell them – for example, 'What I like about that is ...'. On rare occasions, the statement that you disagree with has no element that you can agree with. In this case, recognise that the other person has a valid point of view – for example, 'I recognise that you have a different point of view from me', 'I appreciate that you see things differently'. Then move into your disagreement: 'My experience is ...'. Note that we are still not moving into accusation or saying that the person is wrong.
- 7 **Use 'I' language**, as illustrated in Point 6, above. Avoid starting with 'You' – for example, 'You said ...' is often heard as an attack, even though it is just a reiteration of what was said.

Consider the sentence 'I appreciate that you see things differently'. The first four words of such a sentence may bypass the person's psychological filters and positively impact on their subconscious.

- 8 The next step is crucial. **Avoid responding by using 'but' or 'however'**. 'But' often indicates that an objection is coming and tends to create a defensive mindset in the listener. Avoiding 'but' is difficult as we have become acclimatised to its use in disagreeing situations, which is why it signals a negative response. Pause, or say 'and' or 'even though', and then say something like 'my reservations are ...', 'I am having difficulty with the concept of ...'. Never use a direct rebuttal.
- 9 **Move the discussion forward** – for example, 'And perhaps we can ...'. Notice the word 'we'. Creating an inclusion and posing a proposal allows the participant to support and build on the proposal.



Handling an objection

The best way to handle an objection is to treat it as a request for information. The basis of this approach puts the objector in a positive light. It is important to know what you agree with, so only the difference needs to be considered. Let's look at an example.

The participant says, 'You can't say that!'

- 1 **Seek clarification** even though you may think you understand. Explore exactly what the person is objecting to – for example,

'What is it you disagree with?'. The participant's response may be: 'You can't say that using "but" always indicates that a disagreement is coming'.

It is not unusual for objectors to use absolutes such as *never* and *always*.

- 2 **Find something to agree with** – for example, 'I agree that "but" does not always indicate a disagreement'.
- 3 **Now give information** – for example, 'I have found that using "and" or "even though" is often a more powerful structure.'
- 4 Finally, **check for understanding**.

Giving information – example



'Disagreement is often constructive **but** is uncomfortable.'

The word *but* causes us to focus on *is uncomfortable*. It also gives the feeling that an objection is coming.



'Disagreement is often constructive **and** is uncomfortable.'

The word *and* makes the sentence balanced. This makes it emotionally neutral.



'Disagreement is often constructive **even though** it is uncomfortable.'

The words *even though* tend to create focus on the first part of the sentence. As we have put the positive, or agreeing, part in the first half of our sentence, it is this that subconsciously has emphasis.

Turning objections and difficulty statements into outcomes

*Difficulty in stating* is objecting or disagreeing presented in a softer form. Typically, the sort of thing that is heard is 'The problem with that is ...', 'We can't do that because ...'. Difficulty statements are valuable for trainers because they focus on a problem that, when solved, opens a way forward. Let's look at an example.

A participant makes a difficulty statement – perhaps 'They won't do that, it's too expensive'.

- 1 **Agree** that there is a problem and reframe it to the positive. 'So the problem is affordability.' Note that the negative *won't* is removed.
- 2 **State a goal.** 'So we need to make it affordable.' Notice that the statement is inclusive, using

*we*, not the disquieting *you*. The objector is being gently pulled along.

- 3 Now **seek a proposal** using a *How* question – 'How can we make it affordable?'. *How* questions are problem solving and action based. They tend to gain positive responses from people of good will. They are often useful to open a question to the group.

“Communication within disagreements is a learned skill, using both verbal and non-verbal methods”

General consideration

- Give the other person consideration.
- Enter all disagreements with an open mind.
- Thank the participant for bringing the problem up.
- Ensure you understand exactly what has been said.
- Separate fact from opinion.
- Never disagree with the person; disagree only with ideas or facts.
- Never use invectives or reply in kind to rudeness.
- Recognise that phrasing is everything. Bluntness is just plain rude.
- Build a script book to deal with objections.
- Be prepared to agree with points made.
- Be big enough to concede. If the participant convinces you or others, admit it!
- Know when to quit. Graceful closure is as important as graceful conduct.
- It is permissible to agree to disagree.
- It is always better to debate an issue without settling it than to settle an issue without debating it.
- Do not leave an argument carrying a grudge.
- Always be genuine about what you are agreeing with.
- If the other person's emotions are now channelled against you, absorb them. Don't react.