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MANAGEMENT
PERSPECTIVES

Argument

From the Editor

A number of years ago there was a popular book on the management racks of bookstores called, *The One Minute Manager*. Not too long after, a complementary book appeared — *The 59 Second Employee*. It provided advice on how to keep one second ahead of the One Minute Manager. It was a book worth reading if we didn't want to take ourselves too seriously.

Having a sense of humour helps you put events and circumstances in perspective. Otherwise, we might become so buried in our own world that we define it as the only reality and miss what is really happening around us.

For sure, humour is one way we can gain perspective, but there are others as well. Read several books on the same subject ... talk with people with whom you disagree ... subscribe to a magazine whose bias is different than your own ... develop friendships with individuals who have a different vocation from yours ... attend a play ... challenge others to come up with more than one right answer.

At LIVE Consultants, we help organizations and the individuals in them to gain perspective — in the education programs we develop or the strategic planning we do.

Marilyn Baetz, editor

About the Author and the Article

It seems that some people just love to argue and they'll argue about anything and everything ... sports, politics, the economy, health care, education, the environment, special interest groups, the media, management ... the list is endless. And it doesn't seem to matter to them whom they argue with — friends and family, customers and competitors, suppliers and supporters.

Some arguments can stay as simple debate. But all too often, the argument becomes nasty and hostile with individuals being the brunt of the attack and not the issue.

In this edition, Stephen Baetz, one of the principals of LIVE Consultants, identifies the tactics that argumentative people use and then gives several tips on how to avoid the trivial, yet aggressive, argument.

The article is packed with real-life examples that illustrate what not to do as well as what to do.



Stephen Baetz

Not Just For Argument's Sake

"Here's the pure and simple truth," Will had leaned forward, armed cocked, finger wagging.

Oh no, I thought, truth is rarely pure and hardly ever simple. At least, not to me. But Will had a unparalleled desire to see the world in black and white.

I prepared to defend grey.

"Work isn't as much fun as it used to be."

"That's it?" I asked.

"Yup. Argue that one." He eased back into his chair, content.

"Nice try, Will, but it's not going to work."

"So you think work is more fun than it used to be?"

That was vintage Will: establish a black and white position, watch you squirm, and provoke you to argue the other side. Then, as soon as you did, he came back with shade-of-grey evidence that proved your position was absurd.

Will loves to argue. As he claims, "It's harmless fun. Mental sex."

And for Will it is. He chooses his partners carefully and never goes for the weak of heart or the overly sensitive. Will doesn't have any patience to nurture a wounded ego.

But for too many others, it seems to me, argument is a blood sport, designed to weaken, harm, and intimidate. It traps, confuses, and ensnares the hapless individual who is searching for nothing more than simple understanding.

Here's what I'm unsure about, however. Do most people who argue know that they are and recognize what effect it is having on others? If I had to guess, I'd say they don't. I think most arguers do it unwittingly and would be surprised to hear how those on the other side feel.

Argument Isn't Debate

I want to be clear about what I mean when I say *argument*. In the context of this discussion, I don't mean argument as debate where there's an honest-to-goodness give 'n take in the pursuit of a better idea or solution. Argument, as I mean it here, is nasty and aggressive.

This kind of argument aims to harm and humiliate; its intent is to win by causing someone else to lose.

I recognize that the word itself doesn't have to have that edge necessarily but I want to talk about the most negative meaning of the word.

Gotta See It Comin'

Before you can figure out how to respond to an argumentative person, you have to recognize some of the tactics used. Just watch how it can come at you.

"You did what?"

"I went to the club with the rest of gang."

"But you're under age. Why would you do that?"

"Cause everybody else was going."

"If everybody jumped in front of a car would you do that too?"

The dialogue has been reduced to the absurd and the young person can end up feeling trapped and foolish.

Or maybe you've seen this tactic.

"C'mon only a fool or the most naive would believe that." The argument isn't being attacked, the individual is. The message, simply put, is "You idiot."

Beyond *Reducing to the Absurd* and *Only a Fool*, there is the schoolyard technique of *Is-too-is-not*. This broken record arguer exhausts the other person who often gives up tired of an interaction that is going no where.

Add to the list, *I'm the Expert* and *It Has to be My Definition*. These are used frequently by vocational specialists who want their own way or want the discussion on turf they have tramped.

But one of the most disarming tactics is *You Won the Last One*. The implication is you-owe-me-this-one so we can keep the score even. If you argue the score, you're off into a game of *Control* where the pointed accusation is "You **always** have to have control and win."

Some tactics are driven by guilt.

"So what's your objection?"

"I really only have one."

"Just one?"

“Yeah but it’s important to me.”

“I can understand that you might want to hold this decision up if you had more than one objection ... but with only one objection ... well I just thought you were more of a team player.”

That tactic has it all: guilt, peer pressure, minimizing. The effect is predictable as it is with all the others — some people fight, others withdraw exhausted, and still others, confused by the aggressiveness, freeze.

If those are the tactics, what can you do to avoid responding in kind? Try these tips.

Tip #1: Use I language.

Arguments get started when people are *you’d*: *You* should have known better ... *you* should be able to see that that wouldn’t work ... *you* have to agree with me that The typical reaction is to push back: I should have known better, *you* should have told me ... I should have seen that wouldn’t work, *you* should be more open to new ideas ... I have to agree with you, *you’ve* got to be kidding!

Use I language that talks about your perceptions, opinions, and ideas. For example, “I have another opinion on that subject.”

Tip #2: Focus on the issue, not the individual.

Make sure that all your comments address the issue and avoid any statement that labels or diminishes an individual or group. Arguments heat up when people perceive that the issue is no longer the focus and they or a group are being attacked.

Keeping to the issue will also help you to avoid kitchen sinking — tossing in all previous wrongs or grievances.

Tip #3: Avoid “always” and “never.”

These two words will prompt the other person to prove that you are wrong. All they have to do is cite one exception and your point gets

lost. Maybe you’ve been part of an argument that went like this.

“You never give me the support I need.”

“I don’t know about that. What about just last week when” And so it continues, one side arguing that last week was an exception and the other side pointing out that “never” was unfair and unjust.

Tip #4: Be guided by purpose.

In any interaction, and especially one that has the potential to be argumentative, remind yourself of what you want to accomplish.

Remember the example of a parent interacting with their teenager who went to the club with the rest of the gang? Surely a parent’s purpose is to help the teenager to grow and develop, not to make them feel foolish or silly which is the net effect of reducing the argument to the absurd.

The additional benefit of keeping focused on purpose is that it will prompt you to listen more carefully to the perception and needs of the other person. The teenager’s response — Cause everybody else was going — may not have been what the parent wanted to hear but it did define the need of the teenager to be accepted by a group of peers. A clear purpose should have allowed the parent to hear that need. Once heard, the parent might have been able to help the teenager make better choices in the future.

Tip #5: Don’t keep score.

Interpersonal relationships is not a game in which it’s helpful to keep score. In fact, let me go a step further: keeping score of who won how many arguments and who’s ahead is going to increase tension and hostility.

“So, Will, you think work isn’t as much fun as it used to be.”

“Yup.”

“How come?”

“Nobody argues like they use to.”

“Let’s hope so.”

Select Your Best Facilitators

Think about the cost of education and development.

Got it in your mind's eye?

Next think about what it would cost if your people weren't skilled, knowledgeable, and supportive of your organization's goals, strategies, and values.

An even bigger number.

Now imagine what opportunities you will have lost or sacrificed if you have invested in education and development but have program facilitators who aren't skilled at helping adults learn.

Sure, there are train the trainer programs that can be used but maybe you're missing an important prior step — *selecting the best facilitators possible*. That challenge is particularly important if you are using line managers in the classroom to help make the learning relevant.

To help you select the best, we have developed a Facilitator Assessment Centre. At the end of a day-long process, each candidate will know whether they are suited for the classroom or not. As well, they will receive a report which identifies their strengths and areas for development. The report is based on more than a dozen key factors that we know lead to facilitator success.

The net result is that the facilitators that do qualify, come to a train the trainer program focused and ready to learn.

Imagine the cost if you don't select the best!

For more information about our services, contact us at (519) 664-2213.