

How to disagree with someone more powerful than you

By  Helene Vermaak

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Most people tend to avoid disagreements in the workplace and even more so with a senior colleague. We often assume that disagreeing is going to damage our relationship or career, when in fact the consequences are often less dramatic than we envision.



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It is important to be able to speak up, to know when and how to do so. Here is some guidance to keep in mind when disagreeing with someone more powerful than you:

- **Be realistic about the risks** – it is natural to be nervous and to envision the worst, however in most cases the likelihood of you getting fired or making a life-long enemy are unlikely. Rather evaluate the risks of not speaking up and weigh these up against the potential consequences of taking action.
- **Decide whether to wait** – sometimes it may be better to gather your thoughts. Also, consider the environment you are in before approaching the subject. A public forum or meeting is not always ideal, as the more senior person may feel threatened. Opting for a private discussion will be better and generate effective results.
- **Identify a shared goal** – you are more likely to be heard if you can align your disagreement to the required outcome that the senior person is trying to achieve. However, it is important not to assume that this link will be automatically evident and therefore you will need to contextualise your statement.
- **Ask permission to disagree** – by giving a person the opportunity to agree to the discussion, you will feel more confident in voicing your disagreement. This also establishes a feeling of control for the senior person.

- **Stay calm** – it is important to try to stay calm and in control. We tend to talk louder and faster when we are nervous or stressed. Talking in an even tone helps to calm yourself and the other person.
- **Validate the original point** – by articulating the other person's point of view you lay a strong foundation for the discussion.
- **Don't make judgments** – when expressing your views, avoid any adjectives or judgmental words that can be misinterpreted or taken personally. Rather stick to the facts and stay neutral and focussed.
- **Stay humble** – emphasise that this is your opinion and invite critique and the other person's point of view. Talk tentatively and slightly understate your confidence.
- **Acknowledge their authority** – acknowledge that in the end the more senior person will make the final decision but at the same time do not diminish your opinion. Respect is key, to yourself and the person in power.

ABOUT HELENE VERMAAK

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