How to Put Disagreements to Work for You

When I was doing research for *The Shift*, I once observed a fascinating disagreement among executives. It started when the CEO, two area presidents, and a finance director were going over the data from a recent initiative. At one point the CEO said, "I don't think that number's right."

One of the presidents, Cole, disagreed. "Yes it is," he said, "I'm sure of it," and gave his reasons for thinking that number was accurate. The finance guy also sided with Cole; the number *was* right, his team had double-checked it.

The CEO, however, was unconvinced; he was *sure* the number was significantly off and that the calculations were in error. The group went back-and-forth for a few minutes about the accuracy of this number. The discussion grew serious because the approach to an important issue would depend on the accuracy of that number. After a while, the CEO sent the finance guy back to his team to "check it again, and see if you can find an error," and they all started talking about something else.

Ten minutes later, the finance guy came unceremoniously back in with his laptop and sat down without looking up. The CEO asked quietly, "Did you find the error?" The finance guy paused silently for a moment, then admitted to the expectant

room, "We found the error."

But here's the punchline. Cole, the opposition leader, having been proven wrong in front of the other president, the finance guy, and a note-taking writer, suddenly leapt to his feet, shouted "Oh ho!" and stamped across the room to engulf the CEO in a hug, shaking him by the shoulders and proclaiming, "Oh man, you were right! Of course you were right!" A moment later he suddenly remembered I was there. Turning to me, he gave the CEO one last sportsman's shoulder shake and said, in enthusiasm and explanation, "I just *love* this guy. He's amazing!"

That was pretty cool. But the more important part happened next.

They all went back to the discussion (with the correct number) and made their decisions. Nobody said another word about the error. There were jokes, there was no tension in the room—they just got their work done. If anything, the interlude had made them more jovial.

This was a case where the stakes were high and the disagreement was genuine—and yet when it all shook out, everyone was better off. This is crucial because most of the time conflict in the workplace makes things worse. People take sides, nurse wounded feelings, save up resentment, and keep score; factions develop, and departments square off.

In most work environments, disagreement is fraught with peril because it can so quickly spiral into a crisis that disturbs productivity for everyone. And yet, people are different. They will *always* disagree.

So how do we create a company culture where those inevitable disagreements help instead of hurt?

Take the Other Person's Disagreement as a Signal to Stop

Too often, when we hear others resist or disagree with our ideas, we take that as a signal that we need to dig in and fight harder for our side. But this approach will always backfire.

For one thing, as soon as I start feeling personally attacked and begin defending my position, I have abandoned any attempt to arrive at the right solution. For another, this attitude is insulting to the person doing the disagreeing. She can tell I'm not really thinking about her reasons or valuing her perspective. Then not only are we both defensive and less likely to reach the best conclusion, we've also damaged our relationship.

To avoid this trap, take signs of disagreement as a signal to stop trying to prove your point. Stop talking, stop arguing, take a deep breath, and listen. That will interrupt the cycle of defensiveness before it begins, and will signal to the other that you honor perspective.

Look for What Is Right in What the Other Person Says

Ok, now you're listening. But if you're only listening simply because you're waiting to get back to proving your point, you still won't get anywhere.

You don't need to agree with the other person, but you do have to remember that they are a person, with reasons and hopes and fears and a legitimate perspective. You need to look for what they're saying that you can agree with. And if you can't find it in the first minute, ask clarifying questions until you do.

One of two things will happen. Maybe when you look for what is

right, you'll discover that the other person has actually changed your mind. This is the best outcome—you've been saved from a mistake! You've been reminded that you're not perfect and you've seen the value of what the other person has to offer.

And you've shown them that you can be talked to, you can be trusted, and you care about the right answer more than you care about "winning."

Maybe you look for what's right and you still think your opinion is correct. But now you've grappled with alternatives, listened to another point of view, and gotten insight into another human mind. You're the better for it, and so is your relationship.

Find a Way to Give in Safely

Very few issues are so crucial that they absolutely must be decided correctly the first time. So to build relationships that thrive, not fail, with disagreement, a good leader should look for opportunities to yield to others. *Especially* others lower in the office hierarchy. There are lots of decisions to be made in the course of a day, and risks can be taken with some of them.

Again, two things can happen. Maybe the other person turns out to be right after all; then you and the other have both learned from the experience, and you've discovered an asset you didn't know you had.

Maybe they make the wrong decision. Then you have the chance to revisit the issue, discuss it again, learn from it, and enlist that person in helping correct the error. Now the other person is better at their job, and you've demonstrated that the feelings of others matter more to you than the ability to dictate every little detail.

The long-term gains that arise from nurturing a relationship of trust far outweigh any short-term losses from an imperfect decision. Being willing to give in pays dividends.

Disagreements Don't Have to Be Fraught

People, real people, who have their own independent set of life experiences and goals and expectations, can be expected to disagree with one another on a regular basis about all kinds of things. It is the inevitable expression of our profoundly different inner lives. But those disagreements don't have to be fraught.

I once saw a meeting where two executives strongly disagreed about whether or not to eliminate a subsidiary department. A few weeks later I followed up with Rick, the one who had "lost" the disagreement, to find out how worried he was about the ramifications of this decision.

He was utterly blithe about the whole thing. Not, he explained, that he had really changed his mind. But Rick trusted his colleague to have the interests of the company at heart, and knew he wasn't in it to "win." That meant if the decision proved a mistake, the colleague would reverse course. Rick had nothing to worry about.

By not digging in when others disagreed, by listening for what was right in others' opinions, and giving in when they safely could, this company had established a pattern of disagreement that could weather strong opinions and even serious mistakes.

Disagreements Are an Invitation to Expand in Perspective

When we handle our inevitable disagreements with an eye toward

treating others as truly legitimate people, then they cease to be sources of conflict and hostility. They are an invitation to learn, to grow, to expand in perspective and knowledge and understanding—and leave us better off than we were before.

You can order Kimberly's book here.