



Are You “Disagree- ABLE?”

MOVING FROM CONFLICT TO COLLABORATION



A SPECIAL RESOURCE
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The Boss Doctor™

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Are You “Disagree-ABLE?”

How to Be a Leader Who Can Harness the Power of Diverse, Challenging, Even Opposing Viewpoints and Ideas

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Introduction

It has been said, “Whenever two people on earth agree about everything, one of them is unnecessary.” According to this principle, if you have a team of people who agree with you about everything, then *your whole team is unnecessary!* Or is it? Maybe *you* are the one who is out of step. You’ll never know unless your people are comfortable with constructive conflict. Can they disagree with you? You hold the keys to creating an atmosphere of open communication and honest exchange. Use these five key questions to help you explore your ability to sustain creative and constructive conflict.

1. Can you learn?

Great management and leadership in today’s business (and social) climate requires more than relational skill—it requires *emotional balance*—a depth of maturity that can admit personal limitations; receive new information; embrace differences in people; tolerate failure; accept new roles and responsibilities; and cope with change. This will require all leaders to become avid and adept learners. You’ve got a lot to learn—are you ready? You don’t have much choice! Management and leadership guru Tom Peters warns us all, “Learn fast or get left behind fast.”¹ But learn about WHAT???

Learn about your BUSINESS. Specifically: *How does your organization acquire and use money?* One of the things that all organizations have in common: *They all need money in order to operate.* In one of my previous publications, I wrote about this very topic:

“...learn how your organization stays in the black, so you can understand (and teach your people) how you all can have a positive impact on the bottom-line—in effect, how your team can increase revenue, savings, or productivity. Helping your team see the link between their work and the bottom line is critical to their seeing why it’s not only important for them to do their job, but why it’s important for them to do their jobs WELL.”

Here’s the challenge: *The marketplace is moving fast these days!* And business is shifting into high gear to try and keep up. You will never succeed today, with yesterday’s information and skills. More and more companies are hiring younger workers in order to add their knowledge base to the company workforce. You can’t afford to pretend that you have all the answers any longer—you’ve got to be willing to let your team members help you keep up.

Learn about your JOB. Companies are eager to identify and promote workers with initiative and skill. As soon as you master your current job, you better be ready to learn the skills that you’ll need *to remain mastering your job*, and the skill you will need to succeed *at the next level*. And the chances are good that the skills you’ll need at the next level will be *managing skills*—these are tools that lay beyond the technical abilities that you mastered at the beginning stages of your career. That’s why so many new managers face a steep learning curve and often become casualties of the *Peter Principle*.² Don’t let that happen to *you!* Stay ahead of the curve by starting a lifelong learning process *now*.

Learn about YOURSELF. You cannot be a good leader or manager unless you have a healthy sense of *self-awareness*. Good leadership demands *people skills*, and you can’t develop those without an accurate picture of your own strengths and weaknesses; abilities and shortcomings. Can you accept constructive criticism about *yourself*? Not everyone can—and it’s why so many managers are stuck in dysfunctional behavior patterns and counter-productive leadership styles. It’s why executive coaches are in such great demand!

Learn about your PEOPLE. Your team is the key to your success! How well are you leading them? How well do you understand their unique motivations...their ambitions? How well are you leveraging their knowledge, experience, abilities, gifts, and strengths? How well are you developing their potential as individuals and as a team? *It all depends on how well you know them!*

*If you are not willing to learn, no one can help you.
If you are determined to learn, no one can stop you.*

Use these five questions from Marcus Buckingham as a starting point for learning about your team—and discovering how to *manage* them, *lead* them, *motivate* them, *develop* them, and *reward* them.

5 GOOD QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR PEOPLE...

- 1) *What was your best day at work in the last 3 months?*
- 2) *What was your worst day at work in the last 3 months?*
- 3) *What was the best manager relationship you've ever had? What made it so good?*
- 4) *What was the best recognition you've ever received?*
- 5) *When in your career did you learn the most? Why? What was going on?*

Start your learning process by *asking the right questions*. When you have mastered that skill, *continue* your learning process by *listening to the answers*. That leads to the next point...

2. Can you listen?

Decide right now that you will master the fine art of listening. It is the key to success in all the important areas of management and leadership:

- It is the most basic building block of all relationships.
- It is the best way for us to learn about ourselves from those who know us well.
- It sends an instant and clear message that you respect the speaker.
- It is the main ingredient in establishing and communicating empathy. (More about this in a moment.)
- It informs the listener's intuitive sense of what is not being said.
- It is the key to leading and managing women! (Studies have shown this!)
- It is the most direct channel of information and feedback...

...and (as Ken Blanchard reminds us) *Feedback is the Breakfast of Champions!*

Listening is also the key to moving from *conflict* to *collaboration*. When you switch into "listening mode" you encourage your team to talk and share their ideas, opinions, observations, and critiques. You instantly become more creative, because you have a lot more ideas and information to work with. Keep in mind that your team members represent more "eyes and ears" out there—out "there" in the fray of the organization and the marketplace. So take advantage of their "vantage"—find out what they are seeing and learning, and draw on their insight to make better decisions; solve problems more effectively; and remove obstacles that are hindering the team's effectiveness. The more you affirm their input, the more input they will be likely to share in the future.

3. Can you feel?

Listening is an art that requires attention over talent, spirit over ego, others over self.

Dean Jackson

By this I mean *empathize*. We have high respect and deep loyalty for any leader we believe really knows us, and really understands us. Empathy is a powerful emotional magnet that binds followers to leaders with an almost unbreakable connection. Empathy is also the key to managing change, and the difficult emotions it generates. On the other side of the equation, a lack of empathy is a root cause of management and leadership failure. So... how does a good leader experience empathy and communicate it to others?

Listening is the key. Once again, it starts with patient, focused, attentive listening—listening that allows a leader to gain the perspective and viewpoint of the speaker. Empathy is the ability to see things from another person’s point of view, and understand the emotions that accompany that viewpoint.

Validation is the doorway. When I want to validate your feelings, I say something like:

“If I were in your situation, I would probably feel the same way that you are feeling right now.”

Most of us instinctively want to communicate the opposite, especially when the speaker is dealing with very negative emotions. We make the mistake of trying to “manage” their emotions by attempting to change them or negate them. We say things like, “You shouldn’t feel that way!” or “Don’t feel that way” or “I don’t want you to feel that way” or worse, “that’s not a mature response!” This approach only worsens the situation and creates an adversarial atmosphere.

Validation is a way of saying “I understand.” Think of it more as *observation* rather than *approval*. So when I express emotional validation I’m not saying “your feelings are mature” or “your reaction is healthy” or “I completely agree with your point of view.” Validation only means *“I see how you are feeling, and I see why you might feel that way.”*

Empathy is seeing with the Eyes of Another, listening with the Ears of Another and feeling with the Heart of Another.

4. Can you fail?

One of the most important ingredients for effective leadership is a healthy attitude toward failure. In the real world, of course, failure is impossible to avoid or prevent—it is an inescapable certainty in the reality of human imperfection. What’s a leader to do?

Embrace appropriate failure as an inevitable by-product of innovation. We do our best to avoid failure, but we are willing to risk it when we experiment on the road to creativity and innovation. Remember this adage:

Behold the turtle—he maketh no progress unless he sticketh out his neck.

So failure is appropriate when it comes in the context of a careful calculation of the risks involved. Note the use of the word “careful” here—sloppy preparation or careless thinking is not an *excuse* for failure.

Redeem failure by using it as an opportunity to learn. Thomas Edison is the patron saint of learning-by-failure. His legendary pursuit of a workable incandescent electric light took him through a hundred failures before his discovery of a tungsten filament. Okay, maybe a hundred failures is a little excessive for *your* situation, but the principle is the same—don’t just fail; learn something in the process.

Talk about your own mistakes and failures. When you do that, you give your team permission to do the same. This is a good thing. You want to give them permission to fail appropriately, and not punish them for being imperfect humans. In particular, you don’t want your people to hide their mistakes from you and make matters even worse. If you punish failure too severely, you risk shutting down initiative, creativity and innovation. You push your people towards tacit obedience and compliance, and worse, you risk hindering honest, constructive criticism from your team. They will agree with you in order to avoid any responsibility for the failure of the strategies, policies, and decisions under consideration. You will exercise supreme authority and bear complete responsibility.

It’s not failure that people fear most—it’s blame, shame, and ridicule. The Boss Doctor



A good question to ask yourself: Am I afraid of failure? Take the assessment that is included with this paper (*How Do I Feel About Failure?*) and see if you have an unhealthy sensitivity in this area. Fresh insight about this could be the doorway to new understanding and powerful emotional freedom.

5. Can you follow?

In the twenty-first-century organization, all leaders must learn to follow if they are to successfully lead. ...Yes, leaders must continue to set direction, make tough decisions and choices, and inspire commitment from those who follow them. They must find ways to “go first” and, in doing so, to put their own unique stamp of personality and talent on the enterprise. But that is no longer enough. Leaders at all levels and in all situations must pay close attention to situations in which their most effective option is to follow—not because the hierarchy demands that they “obey,” but because performance requires them to rely on the capacities and insights of other people.³

It’s ironic that the new climate of business demands that leaders become followers. The most effective leaders I know intentionally surround themselves with top-notch people who excel in their fields and then appropriately follow THEIR lead when their expertise surpasses that of the leader and can better inform the leader’s wisdom and decision-making.

When is it appropriate for a manager to step away from leadership and assume the role of a follower?

Staffing by complementation. One of the biggest mistakes a leader or manager can make is to add team members that simply mirror their strengths, gifts, and personalities. It’s a seductive temptation—after all, didn’t we get where we are today by being *who* and *what* we are? “More” must be “better”, right? Not necessarily. Sure, hire people who resonate with your vision, values, and passion—that helps to create and reinforce a consistent corporate culture. But when it comes to your *strengths and gifts*, you want to aim for *complementation*, not *supplementation*. You want to find people who are naturally strong where you are naturally weak. Not a “detail” person? It might be good to have one on your team. Not really a “bean counter”? Better make sure *someone* on your team is going to have a good handle on the finances! If we’ve learned nothing from Marcus Buckingham, we’ve learned that no one can be strong in *everything*. The only sensible response is to make peace with diversity on our teams, so we can leverage one another’s strengths for greater effect and impact. That means leaders must become comfortable leaning on their subordinates’ strengths when appropriate, even if it makes them feel less “in charge” as the leader and less authoritative in their role. Speaking of which...

Deferring to others. When a worker knows best, by virtue of their experience, skill, or judgment, it is appropriate for their boss to become a follower. It’s been said, “*Everyone is an expert in their own 25 square feet of space.*” It is a wise manager who is willing to listen, learn, and follow when a team member is willing to share the knowledge of their work-space experience.

One of the most important leadership lessons is realizing you’re not the most important or the most intelligent person in the room at all times. Mario Batali

Supporting the work of a team member. One of the most important aspects of leadership is to make sure that those under our leadership have what they need to succeed in their various roles and responsibilities. We are always following appropriately when we use our position of leadership to carry water to our team members. This is the thinking behind the adage:

Your #1 Job as a Leader is to help your people succeed!

Supporting the work of the team. We follow the team when the team’s purpose and performance goals demand it; when the team (not us) must develop skills and self-confidence; and when the team’s agreed-upon working approach requires us, like all the others, to do real work.

Supporting the work of the organization. The ultimate form of leadership “following” occurs when we exercise our role in support of the organizational goals, values, and priorities. This is, after all, why we exist in the organization. Contributing to its success is the ultimate expression of humble service and followership.



Putting It All Together

A manager can never assume a team culture of openness, honesty, mutuality and collaboration. Team culture is something that a good manager will shape through the behaviors and attitudes presented in this article. This is how leadership is expressed in the management role—the right investment of listening, learning, and emotional support; appropriate following; and a healthy, realistic tolerance for human imperfection. When managers model these things for their team, they reduce conflict and cultivate an environment of productive collaboration. They also give their team members an effective leadership model to guide *their* journey of growth and development as leaders!

So...*Are you disagree-ABLE?*

- *Can you handle open, honest, constructive disagreement?*
- *Are you teachable?*
- *Can you make authentic emotional connections with others?*
- *Do you have a healthy tolerance for failure and imperfection?*
- *Can you allow others to lead you, when it is appropriate?*

Your answers to these questions will determine in great measure whether your team will experience the frustration of conflict or the joy of collaboration.

*Learning to be a good follower of a good leader is the best training for becoming a good leader in your own right. **The Boss Doctor***

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1. *FastCompany Magazine*, Issue 44 March 2001, p. 124.
 2. The *Peter Principle* states, “In any large organization over time, people tend to rise to the level of their incompetence.” Lawrence J. Peter authored the principle as an observation of the tendency for large organizations to reward worker competence with promotions, until the individuals in question find themselves at a level of responsibility for which they can no longer perform adequately, and thus, stop being promoted.
 3. Douglas K. Smith, “The Following Part of Leading,” *The Leader of the Future*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1996.



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How Do I Feel About Failure?

Fill out this questionnaire, following the instructions on the next page.

| Attitudes, Thoughts, and Behaviors | A | B | C | D | E |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. The thought of failing makes me feel very uncomfortable. | 0 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 5 |
| 2. If someone starts to confront me about my failure, I usually try to shift the blame onto someone or something else. | 0 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 5 |
| 3. I don't like trying something unless I know I can succeed at it. | 0 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 5 |
| 4. I try to "explain" away my failures, by proving that things were out of my control, and unavoidable. | 0 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 5 |
| 5. I have a hard time making decisions. | 0 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 5 |
| 6. I tend to be jealous of other people's success. | 0 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 5 |
| 7. I secretly like it, when other people fail. | 0 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 5 |
| 8. I'm good at noticing where other people mess up. | 0 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 5 |
| 9. I don't like taking on major assignments. It makes me nervous. | 0 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 5 |
| 10. I get angry if other people take credit for my success. | 0 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 5 |
| 11. I don't like to start a project until I have the whole thing mapped out exactly the way I want to do it—start to finish. | 0 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 5 |
| 12. When I see other people failing, I don't feel as badly about my own failures. | 0 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 5 |
| 13. I kind of like pointing out other people's mistakes. | 0 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 5 |
| 14. I'm pretty hard on people when they screw up. | 0 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 5 |
| 15. I hate trying to decide between two similar alternatives. | 0 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 5 |
| 16. I'm more comfortable working on my own than I am collaborating with others (who might cause me to fail!) | 0 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 5 |
| 17. I'm a procrastinator. | 0 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 5 |
| 18. It's hard for me to be happy for other people when they get praise or affirmation for their success. I mostly feel envy. | 0 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 5 |
| 19. I have a lot of unfinished personal projects. | 0 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 5 |
| 20. I hate being a part of a group where I am in danger of being associated with other people's shortcomings and failures. | 0 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 5 |
| 21. I have a hard time beginning big projects. | 0 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 5 |
| 22. I don't like participating on sports teams with bad players. | 0 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 5 |

Instructions

Answer each question by choosing the response that most accurately fits your situation. You will select your response from the lettered columns to the right of the questions, using the key provided to help you interpret the meaning of the lettered columns. When you answer each question, go to the right and circle the number in the lettered column that corresponds to your answer. When you have finished, follow the scoring instructions to interpret your inventory.

A = Strongly Disagree / Very much NO, NOT / Never / Not true at all

B = Mostly NO, Mostly Not True / Rarely / Seldom

C = Somewhat True / Occasionally / Sometimes

D = Mostly YES, Fairly True / Frequently / Fairly Often

E = Strongly Agree / Very much YES / Always / Very true

Keep in mind – this isn't a psychological test, it's just a quick way of seeing how and where you are thinking about the issues of failure and personal value.

Scoring – How Do You Feel About Failure?

Add up the total points by adding all of the numbers you circled in the response columns. Compare your total with the categories listed.

Tolerance – 0 to 22

You are fairly comfortable with failure. You are able to take failure in stride, without feeling a loss of personal value or damage to your ego. You are able to make a healthy distinction between your achievements and your sense of self-worth.

Dislike – 23 to 70

You are a bit uncomfortable with failure. It makes you uneasy. It taps into a vague sense of insecurity about yourself. You may have some difficulty detaching your ego from your accomplishments or your performance. As a result, when you experience failure of some kind, it may make you feel that *you* are a failure.

Aversion – 72 to 110

Failure is definitely threatening to you. It is something you probably try to avoid—maybe avoid *at all costs*—even if it means resorting to unhealthy behavior or illogical thinking. For example, you may try to avoid feeling responsible for your failures by blaming them on circumstances beyond your control, or even shifting blame onto other people. When we struggle with failure, it often makes it difficult to accept big challenges (because we are afraid of failing); or start major projects (unless we feel confident we have everything under control); or even *finish* things that we have started (because if it's not finished, it can't be criticized!) When we struggle with failure, it also makes it easy for us to envy the success of others, and secretly wish failure on other people (because it helps us feel better about our own failures). In order to put failure into perspective, we need to be able to make a healthy distinction between our performance (or achievements), and our sense of personal self-worth. If you struggle with failure, you may find it helpful to talk about this with a good counselor or therapist.