

The Art of Disagreeing (Nicely)

BY JONATHAN DAHL



North Korea's ruler is warned against building up a nuclear arsenal. But, determined to do just that, he blasts off one test missile after another. Across the globe, the leaders of the United Kingdom and the European Union can't agree on the future of work-visa rules under Brexit. Three million workers are left in limbo.

In a precarious world, disagreements can become a very big deal. It's impossible for government leaders everywhere to agree, of course, but their ability to disagree well is what matters most. Indeed, the theme of our cover story focuses on the ambiguities CEOs face nonstop these days—but governments' lack of skillful disagreement is at the heart of it. Back in the day, didn't we simply agree to disagree and move on with a plan? Now, we stew in our disagreements and wonder why nobody can plan well for the future.

In an illuminating piece aptly named "How to Disagree Well," Daniel Goleman, the noted author and expert on emotional intelligence, as well as a Korn Ferry columnist, discusses the art of amiable discord (see kornferryinstitute.com). Granted, the skill won't help anyone get into the head of Kim Jong-un or make Brexit talks breeze by, but it doesn't take a genius to see that mastering a difference of opinion can ease a lot of tension in various work and C-suite arenas.

After all, think of the many company leaders who try to motivate troops around a key strategy but instead only stir up ill will with some thoughtless messaging. ("We need to innovate because nobody here is getting things right!") Or consider team members who think a strategy is bonkers—and may be right—but don't quite know how to say it.

Referencing his own work and a famous essay on the topic, Goleman points out a patently obvious but easy-to-miss point: We tend to disagree more when we are not face-to-face, relying on texts and emails. That's because social circuits

in the brain (and lord knows how blessed we'd be to tap into those more) are designed for people to look at each other's faces. "In person we pick up countless cues on how the other person feels and respond accordingly," he writes.

Turns out, some of those signals help guide us to respond more directly to the content of what's bugging us, instead of attacking the messenger or his tone. Under the cloak of electronic messaging, we may take a whack at the character of a leader—or

the leader may return the swipe—and not realize that insult was taken. Before we know it, the disagreement ratchets up into a full-blown argument or leads to the willful ignoring of a strategy.

Taken apart, bickering can actually be broken into what famed computer scientist Paul Graham likes to call the "hierarchy of disagreement."

That's where the lowest rung starts out with a personal attack, and the highest level focuses purely on content. There are seven stages in all, including name-calling and contradicting, and it's worth comparing them to your own disagreements with the boss.

But if I had one quibble—dare I say disagreement—it would be that it's too easy to blame today's modern communication. We still get things terribly wrong face-to-face, no matter how smart those social circuits in our brains are supposed to be. Ultimately, Goleman suggests that when we come to the table to compare differences, we need to bring our full bag of friendly disagreeing armor with us. That means tools like emotional awareness and emotional self-control. With this, I fully concur. ●



Didn't we use to agree to disagree and move on with a plan?

