

THE ART OF  
DISAGREEMENT

This is one of a series of occasional papers prepared by The Dilenschneider Group to bring clients and friends a different perspective. We hope you find it of interest.

## THE ART OF DISAGREEMENT

Every reader of this “Little Red Book” has opinions on a wide range of issues. It is vital, in a free and democratic society, that these views are expressed and become part of a dialogue that leads to positive progress.

Unfortunately, today we live in a coarse age in a divided country.

The evidence of coarseness is found in so many realms, from the vitriol of talk radio to the epithets that punctuate the comment sections of Internet sites to the anger that so often erupts at town halls. Even our leading institutions are not exempt from the plague; a United States Senator publicly calls a fellow Senator an “idiot” and nary an eyebrow is raised.

The divisions rending us are no less hard to identify. With red vs. blue states, coastal cities vs. fly-over middle America, haves vs. the have nots, and so many other ways of separating ourselves from one another, we are far from a cohesive society.

All that said, there is no reason we cannot be a society where we listen to and respect the views of others—this is a goal we should strive for, and creating the climate has to begin with you.

Coarseness and division do not make for civilized debate and discussion. And yet if we are to move forward in both our daily lives and as a society, we need to recover the lost art of disagreement.

At various junctures, our Country has shown an ability to thrash out issues in a highly civilized fashion. The Lincoln-Douglas debates and the great exchanges on the floor of the Senate between Daniel Webster and Henry Clay are shining examples of how statesmen used the power of the spoken word to rise to great occasions.

There have, of course, been ugly and hostile, and occasionally violent, disagreements throughout our nation's history, most notably during the Civil War and Vietnam eras; however, American society has struggled to hold itself to higher standards despite these eruptions.

Today, it is a challenge for everyone in a position of leadership to conduct civilized discourse. This challenge has arisen because of a changing culture.

On the one side, the rigid Victorian norms of politesse have long ago atrophied.

Once upon a time there were consequences (including dangerous consequences like being challenged to a duel), for ill-tempered and ill-considered remarks. But today we inhabit a world in which anything goes and everything can be said. Our popular culture values uninhibited expression above all else and leads easily to bruised sensibilities, if not broken bones.

This is not a state of affairs we should accept. A seed cannot grow from ground sprinkled with poison. Our Country, our politics, our communities, our civic associations, and our corporations will fare better if we are more considerate in our discourse, more attuned to the sensitivities and sensibilities of others. Our decision-making, both as individuals and as a collective, would not be as distorted by rancor and discord. We would be more satisfied with friends and colleagues and fellow citizens if we were not so often at each other's throats.

## LEARN HOW TO LISTEN

A first step in creating this climate is to learn how to listen to what one's interlocutor is saying. That sounds simple, but it is not. It means holding what you want to say until the other person has expressed their side. It means trying one's best to understand the argument of the other side, even when that argument is being poorly made. For making an argument poorly is not the same thing as being wrong.

The same holds for answering someone who is arguing in bad faith. His bad faith, his lack of integrity, is not a reason to deny his arguments a hearing. There is almost always an underlying logic to both sides of a discussion even if one side fails to articulate what that logic is.

To be a good discussant, one should construct, in one's own mind, the best argument for the other side before even beginning to think about a response.

Admittedly, some situations do not lend themselves to discussion because one's rival is so unreasonable or irascible; however, that is still no justification for bad behavior or escalating a disagreement into all-out hostility. In those cases, it is perhaps best to "agree to disagree," as disputants so often say in classrooms and editorial boards when an impasse has been reached.

## B E PREPARED TO LEARN

The second step to the art of positive disagreement is to be open and ready to learn. It is only by properly conducting a discussion that one can profit from the interchange. If improving is not the point of engaging in discussion, there is no point in engaging in it. One might as well turn away and close one's ears as one has already closed one's mind. The purpose of disagreement and disputation is neither to score points and humiliate nor to direct and command. It is to learn and sometimes to grow.

Of course, in the real world, as we all know too well, matters are seldom like this. Our public square is populated by too many men and women who wittingly and unwittingly employ the darker arts of argumentation. Their goal is not to persuade but to defeat. Instead of taking the high road, they employ techniques that are as discredited as they are effective.

## C REATE AND APPLAUD AN OPEN CLIMATE

One such well-worn technique is the straw man. It consists of presenting an overly simplified version of the opponent's position and then tearing it down. In every case, this classic device needs, first, to be recognized as the fallacy that it is and then answered by pointing out its elements and explaining exactly why they are not persuasive.

The same holds true for that other time-honored thrust of the argumentative shiv: the ad hominem attack. Saying to someone that "you are an unbelievably stupid man," as one television talk show host recently told his guest as they disagreed about gun control, may win favor from those in the choir of the previously converted, but it is not a way to change minds. Going after the man, not the message, must be answered by exposing the technique and showing why it is completely irrelevant to the real issues under debate.

## U SE DOCUMENTED FACTS

There is nothing better to help make your point than using documented facts to illustrate what you have to say. Let facts stand for themselves. There is no need to embellish them or force them on others. In a like manner, however, respect, and even compliment if appropriate, another's use of facts.

# THE PERIL OF THE TOP EXECUTIVE

For those in a position of responsibility and authority, like CEOs, special difficulties arise from their power. The possession of power means that a great many discussions are necessarily conducted with subordinates whose livelihood depends on one's continued goodwill, support, loyalty, and respect. It is precisely the imbalance in power that creates a peril for the CEO.

As much as others depend on the CEO, he must depend on them for the information and the considered opinions that it is their job to provide. Yet if a CEO cannot conduct the discussion in a spirit of honest inquiry, the information and opinions that reach him will be distorted and generally worthless, and possibly counterproductive.

## ENCOURAGE DISCUSSION AND DEBATE

It is essential to foster a climate in which discussion and debate are conducted at the highest possible level, with no fear of expressing one's opinions and without harsh consequences for being wrong. Those leaders who ignore these imperatives tend to be surrounded by yes-men. It is no doubt pleasant to have one's own views constantly echoed and applauded by subordinates. But an effective leader needs to have no-men—those who are able and willing to disagree—close at hand. A top executive needs to listen and learn.

## BUT WHAT IF YOU DO NOT AGREE?

And then there is the way of telling your discussant you do not agree with him without turning him off.

Consider this comment delivered by one wise man to another when the two had widely different views: “Jack, I hear and appreciate your view, but respectfully, will go another way on this issue.”

Hard for Jack and his discussant to feel bad about one another. Indeed, they remained friends for years after this comment.

## ABRAHAM LINCOLN STEPS FORWARD

It is the spirit in which disagreement takes place that will determine our future in every aspect of our society and of our lives. It was Abraham Lincoln who famously observed that “Passion has helped us; but can do so no more. It will in the future be our enemy.” “Reason,” he continued, “cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason, must furnish all the materials for our future support and defense.” In this, as in so many other things, Lincoln was right. The deployment of unimpassioned reason is the essence of the art of disagreement. It remains our future support and defense.

“The Art Disagreement” is the latest in a series of “Little Red Books” published periodically for our clients and friends. We hope our readers find them relevant and of value. Previous titles have included:

- “The *Underappreciated* Art of Saying Thank You”
- “The Age of Apology”
- “Managing Uncertainty”
- “C.I.V.I.L.I.T.Y.”
- “The Lost Art of Listening”
- “Two Decades (1991-2011): The Words and the Deeds”

If you would like additional copies of this or previously issued booklets, please contact Joan Avagliano at [jma@dgi-nyc.com](mailto:jma@dgi-nyc.com).

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