



The Exact Expertise to
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10 Tips for Dealing with Unconstructive Debate Behaviors

Some of what passes for debate in today's polarized media sounds rather more like a screaming match or playground name-calling contest.

Unfortunately, as more and more people are exposed to this style of (non) communication, some of it has filtered into corporate meeting rooms and teleconferences. You may one day find yourself facing such a situation, and it is best to be prepared. Here are some guidelines to keep in mind:

1. **Keep your cool**

Never allow an ad hominem argument or accusation to push your defensiveness buttons, or you may find yourself the focus of a feeding frenzy.

Example: "What is the concern behind that question?"

2. **Stay rational**

Your adversary would prefer to fight the issue on an emotional or polarized basis. Your best offense is to remain perfectly reasonable.

Example: "That's an interesting point of view...how did you arrive at that conclusion?"

3. **Clarify**

Ask the other person to clarify his or her position or rationale. Do this calmly but persistently until you think you understand it (even though you don't agree).

Example: "What is the basis for that position? Explain your rationale to me."

4. **Recognize and Rephrase**

Recognize a "trap question" and rephrase it as that person's opinion rather than answering it.

Example: "I gather from your question that you disagree with me about..."

5. **Insist on Your Airtime**

Don't allow yourself to be interrupted before finishing a thought; insist on your airtime.

Example: "Stop! I'd like to finish my thought; then I'd be interested in hearing your response."

6. **Paraphrase Constructively**

When you paraphrase the other person's point, do it in a way that makes the statement sound more reasonable or intelligent than you actually think it is rather than going down the tempting but dangerous path of making that person sound bad, wrong, or stupid.

Example: "So, from your point of view, you would...do I have that right?"

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7. **Strive for Accuracy**

Don't allow an inaccurate characterization of your views to stand. Stop the process, if necessary, and correct the person publicly but politely by restating your opinion or idea.

Example: "No, that is not an accurate reflection of my opinion. I said..."

8. **Consider their Point**

Look for an opportunity to consider a point the other person is making in a constructive and rational way, even if you still disagree with it.

Example: "Before you continue, let me make sure I have understood your point. You think..."

9. **Inquire**

Use a presumptive question to learn the strength of the other's opinion.

Example: "Are you saying that there are NO circumstances under which you would consider...?"

10. **Advocate**

If the other person does not give you any airtime, interrupt when she or he pauses for breath, but only to paraphrase, in a non-evaluative way, a point the person has made (not to insert your thoughts). Pause for a split-second; then say why you disagree.

Example: "You've made an interesting point about...(pause). Here's where I disagree..."

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