**How to Disagree Agreeably**

***The best ways to comprise, clear the air, and fight fair.***

**By Eric Messenger**

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Yankees and Red Sox. Humans, it seems, are wired for disagreements. These conflicts can be angry, awkward messes, or they can be civil exchanges of viewpoints that lead to better decisions at work and closer relationships at home. What makes the difference is usually not the issue at hand but how it is handled. Here, then, are the rules of engagement, followed by tips on how to speak your mind (to almost anyone). No bench-clearing brawls, no threats of secession, no backseat turf wars involved.

**The Rules of Engagement**

Keep these in mind at your next impasse; they might help you avoid an unproductive argument.

1. **Pick your battles.** “You do not have to address every injustice or irritation that comes along,” says Harriet Lerner. “But it is a mistake to stay silent when an issue matters and the cost of silence is feeling bitter, resentful, or disconnected.”
2. **Understand the stakes.** Even if you think that you know the other person’s issues, it can’t hurt to pose a direct question. Ask “ ‘What’s your real concern here?’ ” says Rebecca Zucker. “Often [the other person is] not really voicing it.”
3. **Wait until you’re calm.** When emotions run high, disagreements can turn personal, and that’s rarely productive. Recognize when emotions are charged, and don’t have the conversation until you have a cool head.
4. **Be respectful.** If someone thinks you’re listening thoughtfully, they are more likely to respond in kind. An empathetic phrase, such as “I understand how you feel,” can go a long way.
5. **Speak for yourself.** Rather than criticizing the other person, stick to expressing your own feelings and actions (“I felt hurt when…” or “I’m concerned because…”). “It’s honest and authentic when you say how you truly view a situation,” says Jennell Evans, cofounder of the Washington, D.C.–based consulting firm Strategic Interactions.
6. **Don’t interrogate.** Try not to go on a lawyerlike attack with a litany of yes-or-no questions. This tactic is aggressive, puts the other person on the defensive, and can belittle them, Zucker says.
7. **State the facts.** If you have them, use them. Facts give opinions and feelings a lot more credibility. It also helps that “they aren’t personal or emotional,” so they can help make your disagreement constructive, Zucker says. Just make sure you really do have the facts. At the very least, you should be able to name your source.
8. **Speak to common interests.** Keep the common goal and good in mind. Remember: If an argument turns nasty, nobody wins. Tell the person how much they mean to you and how much you value their opinion.
9. **Aim to clear the air rather than win.** In many instances, the disagreement will end in détente. Don’t try to win the argument; it’s more important to focus on understanding why the other person thinks differently than you do.
10. **Consider compromise.** It doesn’t get you exactly what you want, but it can be an effective way for people to overcome a disagreement and move forward. Remember: A compromise doesn’t have to be equal to be acceptable. However, it is important for you to understand what you’re both giving up and to be comfortable with that equation. “You don’t have to feel happy about a compromise, but you have to feel you can live with it,” says Robin Hoberman-Becker, a mediator and divorce lawyer in Chicago.

**Name:**

**800 Number:**

**Short Answers: Below you will be given a set of different situations. In each situation, consider the time, place, and manner in which you would attempt to address your concerns. For each situation, identify 1-2 suggestions from the “How to Disagree Agreeably” you would attempt to use. Explain how you would respond to the scenario and why.**

1. At the end of class, your professor returns an exam to you with a low grade. You believe you studied hard for the exam and that you deserve a better grade than the professor gave you. How would you respond and why? What suggestions would you use?
2. A noise complaint was made about your room to the front desk at 2am. An RA was notified and responded to your room. The RA confronts you about the noise level. You are watching TV in your room, but you don’t think the volume is very loud. How would you respond and why? What suggestions would you use?
3. Your suitemates think you haven’t been cleaning the shared bathroom and are upset with you. They confront you about the cleanliness issues when you’re working on homework. You would rather not be bothered, but they insist on talking about “the mess you created in the bathroom.” How would you respond and why? What suggestions would you use?
4. You have been assigned to work on a group project and presentation in one of your classes. You noticed that there’s one person who rarely attends the group meetings and doesn’t seem to be contributing to the project. This is irritating you because everyone should be involved. How would you respond and why? What suggestions would you use?
5. Over the phone, a family member has expressed concern about your priorities while you’re in college. The family member has suggested that you’re being “lazy” and that you care more about “partying.” You disagree with this accusation. How would you respond and why? What suggestions would you use?