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Dissensus or Consensus? The Art of Productive Disagreements

Hershey Friedman, Brooklyn College of CUNY
Deborah Kleiner, St. John's University

Introduction

Knowing how to disagree constructively, in a way that does not result in lasting wounds and grievances, is vital in many areas of life, including business. Effective negotiations require the ability to debate fruitfully. Given that this is a crucial skill, it is not surprising that courses and programs in conflict resolution and negotiations are popular.

Productive arguing requires specific soft skills that include critical thinking, communication, listening, and interpersonal skills that most employers believe new college graduates lack. About 73% of employers assert that they have difficulty finding students with these necessary soft skills (Wilkie, 2019). Some people suffer from need-to-win personalities and will use any strategy or approach to ensure that they are the victor in disagreements. This temperament type is a disaster when trying to reach a compromise or settlement and turns minor disputes into ugly altercations. Jacoby (2011) posits that it is not strangers that we should fear; it is our neighbors. They are more likely to harm us over disagreements than foreigners. Most wars we are seeing today are civil wars; many could have been avoided if the parties had used constructive arguing to negotiate (Kriesberg, 2015). Sadly, toxic polarization and hyper-bipartisanship threaten American democracy and might result in a civil war (Marche, 2022; Walter, 2022). This is ironic given that the United States was founded on compromise (Leskes, 2013).

Higher education is also partially to blame for not teaching students to debate respectfully

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and productively. Friedman and Friedman (2021, p. 3) point out that "In academe, rather than encouraging collaboration among departments, it is common for faculty members to disrespect those of another discipline." Battles over turf and disciplinary elitism are legendary at many colleges and universities. This, even though diversity of opinion makes people more intelligent (Duarte et al., 2015; Friedman, Friedman, and Leverton, 2016; Phillips, 2014; Zalis, 2017).

Gunther (2017) describes ten need-to-win fighting strategies. What they all have in common is that disagreements are handled with a lack of mutual trust and respect. Several of the above strategies are used when the need-to-win partner desperately wants a victory and does not care about the consequences. This individual might bring up irrelevant issues from the past to deflect attention from the current concern or use ad hominem personal attacks or even attribute false statements to their partners, allowing them to mock or gaslight them.

The proper way to disagree is to carefully listen to what the other party says and understand it. If it is clear that one of the parties has fallen into the need-to-win trap, end the debate, or it will result in a severe conflict. Gunther opines that need-to-win approaches to debating are frequently unconscious behaviors. People can and should train themselves to avoid using this fighting style.

Disputes and arguments do not have to be acerbic; it is essential to understand the other party's viewpoint and use positive terms in stating one's position; it is also helpful to recognize areas of agreement (Gino, 2020). Constructive fighting may bolster a relationship. John Gottman, an expert on relationships, uses the "Four Horseman of the Apocalypse" metaphor to describe the communication styles that can predict the demise of a marriage. These "horsemen" are criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling (Lisitsa, 2013). Couples who stonewall, which means totally avoiding arguing, or who, when they do disagree, are contemptuous of each other by being caustic, sarcastic, condescending, and making it apparent that they have no respect for what their companion is saying are fighting destructively. Destructive arguing is unproductive and does not bode well for the couple's future.

It has been proposed that constructive arguing, coined by some scholars as "commitment through contestation," fosters a healthier and more engaged work environment (Price and Whiteley, 2014). Employees are encouraged to constructively debate workplace values and decisions, thereby enhancing their commitment to the corporate culture. Schormair and Gilbert (2021) identify a five-prong procedural framework towards what they term "discursive justification." The goal of this process is to discourage stakeholder value dissensus and encourage stakeholder value consensus.

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Cognitive Biases

Ariely (2008) uses the latest research to demonstrate that people are predictably irrational; they use heuristics or rules of thumb to make decisions. Heuristics may be seen as "cognitive shortcuts" that humans utilize when there is a great deal of required information to collect to make a correct decision, but time and/or money are limited. Using rules of thumb may help a person make quick decisions but might lead to a systematic and predictable bias. Many of these biases interfere with constructive negotiations (Caputo, 2013). To have productive discussions, one must be aware of the different cognitive biases that interfere with rational decision-making. The following are just a few examples of relevant cognitive biases.

Certainty Bias/Overconfidence Bias

Kolbert (2017) highlights the fact that "People believe that they know way more than they actually do." This overestimation of the knowledge we possess is known as the overconfidence effect. Sloman & Fernbach (2017) also speak of the "knowledge illusion"; we do not understand how little we actually know. With certain kinds of questions, answers that people think are "99% certain to be correct" turn out to be incorrect 40% of the time (Kasanoff, 2017).

Burton (2008a, 2008b), a neurologist, believes that human beings cannot avoid certainty bias —a "potentially dangerous mental flaw" — but can moderate its effect by realizing that feelings of certainty are not based on logic and reasoning. These feelings result from "involuntary brain mechanisms" that have little to do with the correctness of a belief. This is why intuitions, hunches, premonitions, and gut feelings need to be empirically tested. Critchley (2014) relates the concept of uncertainty to a tolerance of others and attributes the existence of Auschwitz to the certainty bias. Lloyd (2017) also feels that moral certainty is dangerous and a threat to humankind. It should not be surprising that expert predictions usually turn out wrong (Kahneman 2011, pp. 218-219, Tetlock, 2005).

Confirmation Bias

Once people form an opinion, they tend to only listen to information supporting their preconceptions and reject information not in conformity (Heshmat, 2015). People may have the ability to see flaws in their opponent's arguments, not their own opinions.

Given the enormous amount of research available to scholars, it is not difficult for a researcher to cherry-pick the literature and only reference studies supporting a particular opinion (confirmation bias) and exclude others. Even if individual studies are done correctly, this does

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not guarantee that a researcher writing a state-of-the-art review paper will write an accurate, undistorted synthesis of the literature. Indeed, Celia Mulrow demonstrated that many review articles were biased (Goldacre, 2011).

Fundamental Attribution Error

The fundamental attribution error refers to the tendency of a person observing another person's behavior to attribute it to internal factors or personality and to underestimate the effect of situational causes (i.e., external influences). Their own behavior, however, is attributed to external situational factors. In other words, we believe that others do what they do because of their internal disposition. Thus, if you see someone fighting with another person, you will probably attribute it to the fact that the person has a violent temper, not that he is being mugged.

Loss Aversion

The pain of losing something we own outweighs the joy of winning by as much as two to one. Thus, for example, the pain of losing $1000 that you currently have is about double the intensity of the joy you would experience getting $1000. Thus, individuals are more willing to engage in risky behaviors or even act dishonestly to avoid a loss than to make a gain (Schindler and Pfattheicher, 2017).

Status Quo Bias

Status quo bias is a cognitive bias that occurs when people favor the familiar and prefer that things remain the same rather than opting for change. It also manifests itself when inertia results in people continuing with a previously-made decision rather than trying something new; inaction is easier than making decisions. People are more upset by the negative consequences of a new decision than by the effects of not making any decision (Kahneman and Tversky, 1982).

Taylor (2013) highlights that biases can result in poor decision-making, but there are ways to reduce these biases. First, one must be aware of the different types of biases, and by studying and understanding them, one can reduce their impact. Second, he asserts that collaboration is probably the most powerful tool for minimizing cognitive biases. Kahneman speaks of "adversarial collaboration," which means bringing together two researchers who disagree and

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having them conduct an experiment jointly as a way to reduce confirmation bias (Matzke *et al*., 2013; Kahneman, 2012). This is why it is crucial to have diverse groups (groupthink is also a bias) to work together to make a decision.

Conclusion

The Talmud describes how the Academies of Shammai and Hillel debated each other regarding Jewish law, and it ultimately became violent. It took a heavenly voice to declare that both opinions are "the words of the living God, but the law agrees with the School of Hillel." Why? Because the Hillelites were kindly and modest, they studied their own opinions and those of the School of Shammai; they would even respectfully mention the view of the School of Shammai before their own (Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 13b).

Any organization which finds a way to allow people to disagree constructively will thrive. This requires that a few fundamental principles be followed: Respect diversity of opinion; Possess humility and patience; Understand the viewpoint of one's debating partner; Know that truth is more important than winning an argument; Eliminate the need-to-win strategy; Be aware of cognitive biases.

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