

## How to Disagree Agreeably

The best ways to compromise, clear the air, and fight fair



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Yankees and Red Sox. Red states and blue states. Your seven-year-old and your nine-year-old. 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, author of *The Dance of Anger: A Woman’s Guide to Changing the Patterns of Intimate Relationships* (HarperCollins, \$14, [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)). “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, cofounder of Next Step Partners, an executive-coaching and leadership-development firm in San Francisco. “Often she’s 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, she is 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 tack is aggressive, puts the other person on the defensive, and can belittle her, 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 she means to you and how much you value her 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.

#### How to Disagree With Your Boss

**Disagreements:** You're being overlooked for promotion; you think a client should be handled differently; you don't like the coffee in the office pantry.

**What to consider:** Your financial security may well depend on your ability to get along with this person. If you disagree with a policy, start by saying something positive, says Evans. “You're not there to attack,” she says. “You might say, ‘You know how much I value your leadership, and I want to speak openly and honestly with you.’” Be sure to end the conversation as respectfully as you started it, by thanking her for listening. And, for heaven's sake, be concise: “People get going and then make the mistake of going over the line,” says Marjorie Brody, a workplace-communication expert in Philadelphia and the author of *21st Century Pocket Guide to Proper Business Protocol* (Career Skills Press, \$20 [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)). “Make your point, and know when to stop.”

**When to defer:** In the end, almost always, assuming you like getting that paycheck. One exception: if you have a good track record or a friendly relationship with your boss and can lobby her to your side.

**Rule to remember: Be respectful.** You don't have to grovel, but you do need to bring respect to every interaction, Evans says.

#### How to Disagree With Your Coworkers

**Disagreements:** Who is to blame for the presentation that tanked; what tack should be taken with a new project; why you're so much more competent than they are (not that you can actually say this).

**What to consider:** “Your ability to get things done at work almost always depends on other people,” Zucker says. “Disagreeing in an abrasive manner that puts people off can really hurt your career.” So rather than arguing, say something like “I see your perspective on this, but...” Zucker suggests. If a coworker feels you have really listened, she will be more likely to work with you on producing the best possible solution — whether it's yours, hers, or some kind of compromise.

#### WEB RESOURCES

##### Ask Jeeves

([www.ask.com](http://www.ask.com))

Do you and your friend argue over things like, say, the name of the first Darren Stephens on *Bewitched*? Jeeves knows the answer to this question (Dick York) and thousands of other trivial pursuits.

##### Harvard Ombuds Office

([www.hms.harvard.edu/ombuds](http://www.hms.harvard.edu/ombuds))

If you find yourself in too many heated discussions, maybe you should work on more than your debating skills. This Harvard site gives tips on improving interpersonal communication skills.

##### [www.relaxingspirit.com](http://www.relaxingspirit.com)

Try one of this site's one-minute relaxation exercises before you do or say something in anger that you'll regret later.

**When to defer:** If your colleague is managing a project and you're executing just one task. If you feel the project has gone woefully awry under her tutelage, offer a suggestion for plan B.

**Rule to remember: Speak to common interests.** "Find the common interest so you can agree more quickly about what's needed," Zucker says.

#### How to Disagree With Your Spouse or Significant Other

**Disagreements:** The amount you should be willing to pay for new stereo speakers; the way someone's bad mood casts a pall over the entire evening; the rightful home of dirty socks.

**What to consider:** Validation from one's mate is so important that when people don't have that approval, they often argue especially adamantly or angrily. If the two of you have perennial sore points — his smoking, your chronic lateness — consider what you can do to help each other. "This way you're taking responsibility for helping to change what you don't like," says Barry Duncan, Psy.D., a clinical psychologist and the author of *What's Right With You: Debunking Dysfunction and Changing Your Life* (Health Communications, \$10, [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)).

**When to defer:** Actually, it's not so much when to defer but when to take a break — and that should happen whenever the discussion devolves into angry or petty attacks. Make sure you revisit the issue, and give the discussion enough time (when cool heads are prevailing).

**Rule to remember: Speak to common interests.** "You need to consider what's really important, versus 'Did he leave the toilet seat up again?'" Hoberman-Becker says.

#### How to Disagree With Your Teenagers

**Disagreements:** Curfew; the age-appropriateness of that movie on Cinemax; what distinguishes a miniskirt (so she says) from a really thick belt (so you say).

**What to consider:** Peacefully debating a topic can help your teen hone reasoning skills. Also, it's a nice way to let her know she has earned your respect. However, don't negotiate everything. Teenagers still want — and need — limits.

**When to defer:** The moment she's persuaded you by maturely presenting her case — something a little more concrete and better researched than "But everyone else's parents let them stay out till 12:30!"

**Rule to remember: State the facts.** "Sometimes teenagers need structure," says Linda Stone-Fish, Ph.D., a professor of marriage and family therapy at Syracuse University, in New York. And sticking to the facts will help you provide it.

#### How to Disagree With Your Parents

**Disagreements:** How often they should offer unsolicited advice; what constitutes spoiling your kids; whether a three-week stay on the sofa bed is acceptable.

**What to consider:** You've known your parents your whole life, so your disagreements may have been years in the making, and therefore can take time to sort through, Lerner says. Many people don't stand on ceremony with family members, unleashing brutally honest (or just brutal) opinions with no fear of consequences. But in the interest of solving the problem, try to remain as civil and calm as possible.

**When to defer:** When the issue isn't that important to you, or when you're on your parents' turf. Just as you want them to adhere to your house rules, you can expect them to want theirs to prevail in their home.

**Rule to remember: Pick your battles.** "Parents can have a tendency to not see their children as adults," Hoberman-Becker says. You'll have a better chance of being heard if you pick your battles rather than complaining about everything you think they're doing wrong.

#### How to Disagree With Your Siblings

**Disagreements:** How to care for your parents; who gets what; whether your boyfriend or spouse is "right for you."

**What to consider:** Disagreements between adult siblings can be very raw; they are often

enmeshed in issues and emotions that go back years. Try to bridge awkward ones with a gesture of respect or affection. Instead of angrily confronting your brother about the way he treats your boyfriend, say something like “Your opinion means so much to me that it hurts when you act that way,” Stone-Fish advises. “Whatever the issue is, with siblings it’s also usually about feeling disrespected or not cared for.”

**When to defer:** When it looks as if other family members will get roped in, which is unnecessarily messy, Stone-Fish says, or when the discussion is about the way your sister lives her life. State your opinion and let her know you’re concerned, then let it be.

**Rule to remember: Be respectful.** Respect reflects the importance of your bond, Lerner says: “You can say, ‘I want us to talk about things that matter because you’re important to me.’”

#### How to Disagree With Your Best Friend

**Disagreements:** A job’s merits; whose schedule is worse; the nutritional value of an all-chicken-nugget diet for your kids.

**What to consider:** Inherent in a best-friend relationship is a tendency to agree about most things, so big disagreements can be unsettling, Stone-Fish says. But if handled the right way, they can help strengthen the relationship.

**When to defer:** If it’s one of her core values and not one of yours. For instance, if she’s a vegan, stop trying to talk her into taking “a tiny nibble” of your tenderloin recipe.

**Rule to remember: Speak for yourself.** “During disagreements with your best friend, you’re usually speaking from a place of hurt rather than anger,” says Stone-Fish.

#### How to Disagree With Your Neighbors

**Disagreements:** The predawn barking of their Brittany spaniel; their responsibility for the tree limb dangling precariously from their yard over your roof; the aesthetic value of a rust-riddled jalopy in the driveway.

**What to consider:** This person shares a property line with what is probably your most valuable investment. Maintaining cordial relations is key, says Margo Howard, author of Slate.com’s [Dear Prudence](#) advice column. In many cases, local ordinances govern noise and yard-decor concerns. For those dangling limbs, call the town hall to find out whose responsibility it is. When complaining to your next-door neighbor, always give her a graceful way out (“I’m sure you probably don’t realize...”) and emphasize that if the situation were reversed, you’d want to help her.

**When to defer:** If it’s the first time their son’s heavy-metal band has held a practice at dinnertime, don’t call in the National Guard. Bring it to your neighbor’s attention after a few incidents — before you feel overwhelmed and angered by it — and see how you can work together for a solution.

**Rule to remember: Be respectful.** Be respectful, Hoberman-Becker says. Otherwise, “it can make living next door to them a nightmare.”

*Written by Eric Messinger  
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