

Leadership Barometer 117 Please Help Me Understand Robert T. Whipple, MBA CPTD



There are times in life where we really need help to understand the point of view of another person. On a daily basis, we experience situations where we are at odds with the actions or words of other people. It is human nature to disagree with other people at times.

How we handle ourselves when this happens determines our quality of life, because it will establish how the rest of the world reacts to us. Extending hostility usually begets hostility in return.

The late Supreme Court Justice, Ruth Bader Ginsberg, used to challenge people to learn to "disagree without being disagreeable." We need to find the words to signal a disconnect without short-circuiting relationships.

If you listen to people as they interface about their differences, you will hear all kinds of phrases that cause an increase in heat within the conversation. Here is a small set of examples you will recognize:

- **What makes you think that...**
- **How could you possibly believe that...**
- **Who died and made you the queen of...**
- **You are not only wrong, you are stupid if you...**
- **What part of "NO" don't you understand....**
- **Don't you see! My way is better because...**
- **You never listen to me...**
- **If you believe that, I have a bridge to sell you...**

There are millions of ways to humiliate other people when we disagree with their words or actions. Note that the statement may be current or past, written or verbal, and the action may be historical, or something that just occurred.

What we need to do is suppress the human urge to blast the other individual and seek a more politic way to have an adult conversation.

Watch the non-verbals

The four-word phrase, "Please help me understand..." is an excellent one to use as long as it is not given with a sarcastic tone of voice or some aggressive body language, like pointing. Reason: The words do not start by putting the other person down.

The phrase "Please help me understand" indicates there may be a disconnect, or maybe there is just a misunderstanding. It signals that you are open-minded. The phrase simply asks for more information and indicates that you are ready to listen carefully. It calls into question the action or statement without violating the other person.

The phrase may not work in every application, since we are all different. Some individuals might even read something negative into the phrase. I think it has a lot to do with what is in the heart of the sender. Keep in mind that body language speaks many times louder than words.

By sending a polite signal about a disconnection with the other person, it gives him or her time to rethink what was said or done to see if it was too edgy. Often just this little nudge will cause the person to reframe the action or statement into something more reasonable. It is also an honest and kind way to stop the conversation for a gut check on reality.

Conclusion

When you are tempted to blast a co-worker for something said, written, or done, think about saying, "Please help me understand," and you will see a more helpful and constructive reaction in most cases.

Robert Whipple is also the author of The TRUST Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals and, Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online. Bob consults and speaks on these and other leadership topics. He is CEO of Leadergrow Inc. a company dedicated to growing leaders.

