



Rules of Engagement

Confrontations and arguments in the workplace can be effective when approached properly

By Tom Comi

Some might find it odd to argue that arguing in a business setting can be healthy, but a solid case can certainly be made for the merits of doing so if done properly.

The fact of the matter is confrontation in an office can actually be quite healthy. Whether it's a manager and an underling verbally sparring with one another, or two same-level employees getting into a war of words, it's the end result of the conversation that ultimately matters.

In their book *The Art of Constructive Confrontation*, authors John Hoover and Roger Disilvestro address the importance of challenging a colleague.

Supply Side USA Marketing Supervisor Don Provident (left) and company President Barry Johnston have a candid but cordial conversation about a new package design.

"Confrontation merely means to face something or someone head on, directly and purposefully," they write. "Confronting someone is an attempt to forge a solution, seek a remedy or simply stay on top of a situation. There's nothing inherently negative or positive about it. Confrontation is essentially neutral."

They say that many people won't engage a co-worker for fear of damaging their relationship with that person or harming their standing within the company.

"People are socialized to avoid confrontation when it's conflict they're afraid of," they say. "Not being direct about their wants and desires, they talk about everything but what needs to be confronted until a conflict erupts. Then the confrontation can't help but be associated with conflict."

So how do these principles translate to the self storage industry? *SSA Globe* contacted a few company executives for their thoughts on the matter and how they handle office interactions.

Internal Exchanges

Patrick Reilly is president and CEO of Urban Self Storage, which has 132 employees at approximately 60 facilities in the states of Oregon and Washington. He says he emphasizes an open relationship with his managers and workers and encourages differing opinions.

“We are open to ‘spirited exchanges’ within our company,” he explains. “Employees are invited to challenge key changes to policy, strategy and operations. However, there are limits; we all must follow a code of conduct that respects the opinions of other employees and professional decorum. Also, once a decision is agreed upon then it is time to move forward as a team and give our best efforts for success.”

As president of Supply Side USA, Barry Johnston says he trusts the experience of his four managers and 20 employees to speak up—even when they disagree with him or a colleague.

“I wouldn’t say we have heated exchanges, but we definitely have lively debates,” he explains. “We have a team that has more experience than anyone in the industry, so there are some strong personalities ready to be the devil’s advocate on any given topic they feel confident or passionate about. It would be foolish on my part not to foster an environment where everyone is open to express their opinions.”

Some might wonder whether a boss loses control if he does allow his employees to challenge his authority, but Johnston sees it differently.

“You risk losing a lot of great ideas,” he says. “If you shut people out, you’re going to get a minimal amount of creativity and input. We have people that talk to our customers all day long, so their input is critical.”

Reilly agrees with that sentiment, but he adds that a chain of command is still important to maintain within a company. Urban Self Storage has weekly meetings with managers in which employees are allowed and even encouraged to challenge ideas.

“Sometimes, allowing too much debate of ideas or procedures may undermine the authority of a manager by inferring that the manager does not have the right to make the decision,” he notes. “There is an appropriate time, place and manner to challenge an idea. Once a decision has been made, there is a time, place and manner to provide feedback on the performance of a new idea.”

Perhaps the most important point to make when discussing arguments or confrontations in the workplace is the manner in which they take place. There is a huge

distinction between taking an idea to task and taking a person to task.

“Challenging the idea is addressing and professionally debating the merits or weaknesses of an idea or strategy based on the idea *only*,” Reilly says. “Criticizing the person who is proposing the idea—by bringing up past wins/losses, the person’s beliefs/opinions or expressing an opinion about the person’s character outside of the idea—is challenging the person.”

Johnston concurs: “Challenging an idea relates to your business philosophy. Challenging a person relates to personal and emotional issues that have probably built up over time. Fortunately, our management team is a tight group. Each person has a clearly defined area of responsibility and a respect for each other’s opinion.” ❖

Mincing Words

Instead of stalling a debate with confrontational phrases like these:

- ✗ “I disagree with you.”
- ✗ “That’s just where you’re wrong.”
- ✗ “You are dreadfully mistaken.”
- ✗ “That is absurd.”
- ✗ “You’re on the wrong track.”
- ✗ “Don’t tell me that.”
- ✗ “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”
- ✗ “That is ridiculous.”

Try advancing the conversation with diplomatic phrases like these:

- ✓ “Have you carefully considered so and so?”
- ✓ “I believe someone has said...”
- ✓ “There is good authority for the statement...”
- ✓ “Many persons think...”
- ✓ “Should we not give weight to...?”
- ✓ “Have you heard the argument of...?”
- ✓ “How do you account for...?”
- ✓ “I may appear stupid, but would you mind making that a little clearer to me?”

(Source: oldandsold.com)