

Disagreeing Agreeably

John Lubans Jr.

“If you want to get along, go along.”

—Sam Rayburn

I first read the Rayburn quote in political science class. We were studying policy making and why politics as usual often prevails. One explanation was the Rayburn adage. Elected officials get ahead through alliances and accommodation. Going against the establishment can sideline a promising career, can leave the principled politician tilting at windmills.

Most of us learn in childhood that bending to peer pressure is less bruising than not making nice. People who rock the boat, ruffle feathers, and otherwise upset the social appletart pay a high price. Coming into our first professional positions, we may feel like the next young Turks, ready to ring out the old and ring in the new. Our mentor’s immediate advice: “Tone it down!” further admonishes us to be circumspect in our criticism, to adopt a deferential tone, even if we are deeply offended by the status quo. To get ahead, many of us opt to follow Mr. Rayburn’s advice.

Along this line, something curious happens in my management classes when I assign tasks to small groups, like building the tallest paper pyramid or tossing the most balls into containers. Besides the students getting to know each other better, I am opening a window onto teamwork dynamics. Afterwards, we talk about what participants learned about themselves as team members and how this learning may relate to the workplace. Among the debriefing questions I ask the class are: How did decisions get made? Who took the lead? Did anyone feel left out? Were some ideas ignored? What would you do differently?

Strikingly—even when I have observed discord—the in-class feedback is uniformly harmonious. I hear about the good teamwork, how they all pulled together, and how all ideas were treated fairly. When I ask why some people were standing off to the side, the explanations shy away from any hint of dissatisfaction.



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Last semester, after each event, I asked each student to reflect and compose a one-page essay on what they learned.

These essays contradicted the rosy interpretations in the debriefing. They wrote of feeling left out and slighted, and that their ideas went unappreciated. Some complained about self-appointed leaders who bossed them around and excluded others from the decision making.

Why were the papers radically different from the in-class discussion? Why did the offended make nice instead of refusing to go along? Well, for one thing, these are mature students, with plenty on their plates. They do not need the emotional burden of confronting a pushy classmate. Most are focused on getting through the graduate program and do not want to make waves—their energy is taken up by family and a full-time job.

And, they may believe I will be upset with them if they blow the whistle. They may anticipate that I want a happy team. Why else would I have them working in teams? If they confront an overbearing classmate, there’s the possibility I may blame the confronter for disrupting the process.

Or, we may lack the vocabulary to disagree, agreeably.

This semester I’ve given each student a red card—the kind soccer referees use to expel the egregious offenders. I explained that each of them could use the card to stop a group and have it listen to what he or she had to say. Will any red cards fly thru the air this semester? I hope so. The students now know they have my permission to disagree and, if they throw a card, they get to practice making clear what is bugging them.

Our reluctance to dissent is not limited to the classroom. Are there not librarians in your experience who do not talk to other librarians, some entire departments who don’t speak to other departments? What about you? Have you held back your dissenting voice when the majority appears to be strongly in favor of some action?

Accommodation, avoidance, and compromise lead to group-think. If enough of us believe something, it must be so—even if it isn’t. When a dominant viewpoint goes unchallenged, when we shield it from the crucible’s fire, we are likely to find ourselves plain wrong.

I once chaired a task force to design a user-education program for all freshmen at a large public university. Our planning and design sessions were marked by high energy

and a congenial harmony. During a status report to the library, a colleague asked a potentially show-stopping question. She wondered about the wisdom of not involving the teaching assistants in the design. We pretty much ignored her question because we believed the head of the English department backed us 100 percent, and, importantly, that the criticism came from outside our task force. We were blind to any failure scenario. We were doing good—how could anything go wrong?

Just about everything did. Our untested design began to crack as the teaching assistants gave voice to their understandable resentment about being excluded and having to give up five hours of instruction. In their view, the library was boring the students with hours of irrelevant content. After the fourth class session, the department head gave in to the criticism. The fifth and final class would be optional. That last class is forever engraved in my mind. A few dozen students showed up for my section; they had not heard that the library classes were no longer required. When I told them the class was optional, I thought most would stay. Wrong again. They stampeded for the door, leaving me in a metaphoric cloud of dust.

In retrospect, what would I do differently? Just about everything. First, I'd have a thorough discussion in the task force on the purpose and goal of the program and would ask the question, "If we don't create this program, what will happen?" I'd want us to envision the best and worst outcomes. Then, if we still saw an opportunity, I'd seek the help of the teaching assistants and the students.

Libraries like to depict themselves as congenial and collegial places to work. The two words often appear interchangeable like in this quote from a recent job ad: "An exceptionally congenial collegial atmosphere has characterized the . . . department."

This blurring of differences between the words suggests two things. One is etymologic—that the words are evolving in meaning. The other questions why they are evolving, possibly merging. Are we more prone to take disagreement, any disagreement, personally? In other words, if you disagree me with me, I may wind up not liking you. Has winning the "Most Congenial" award become more important than seeking truth?

Collegiality is about respectful disagreement in pursuit of the best solution. Being collegial involves vigorous and energetic discussion. It is about collaboratively working our way through conflicting views to get to the best decision.

Congeniality is about being liked, being among like-minded people, like desirable dinner mates on a cruise ship. The word's meaning is captured in a phrase like the "genial warmth of the afternoon sun."

It is possible to be collegial and *uncongenial*. Even if our coworkers are not our bosom buddies, we can still have spirited and respectful discussion. That said, there's hardly any excuse for boorish behavior, uncongeniality carried to the extreme. On a campus where I worked, one art historian intimidated the branch library staff. Whenever

frustrated—a perennial state—this professor would yell at the librarian, "You and your stupid staff always misshelve the books I need," or "I ordered this book two weeks ago, where is it? You must have lost the order, again." After enduring several weeks of this petty behavior, the branch librarian lost her usual composure. She was multitasking that day and eating lunch at her desk. Seeing red at his latest tantrum, she hurled her egg salad sandwich at the professor. She missed (unfortunately), and the sandwich splattered against the wall. While the professor's outbursts were excused by the department head, the librarian was disciplined for her uncongeniality.

So, if tossing food at those giving us a hard time is not an option, how do we disagree agreeably?

Library leaders can encourage opposing views and, through their actions, eliminate an organization's fear of disagreement. A leader can demonstrate she supports open discussion without retribution.

Specifically, to assure a well-rounded understanding, the leader can make certain that proposals always include pros and the cons. Someone can be assigned to argue for and someone can argue against a proposal. How the leader deals with uncongenial or alien ideas models how she wants staff to deal with similar situations.

Individually, we can improve how we disagree. Instead of feeling threatened when someone offers a dissenting view, I can ask clarifying questions. I can give the person a chance to explain. Personally, I've little doubt that a better understanding of the opposition would have helped me clarify my own points of view and would have enhanced my ability to explain why a change was essential.

If we are less than fluent in presenting opposing views without putting the other person on the defensive, here are a few opening phrases—when presented in a friendly, non-combative tone of voice—guaranteed not to offend:

Your view is very interesting, and I think . . .

It's been my experience that . . .

You may be right. I'm pretty sure that . . .

Disagreeing with peers is probably less difficult than disagreeing with your boss. For example, put yourself in the librarian's shoes in the following two cases.

The executive group, of which you are not a member, has decided to move your work group to a location outside the library. You've been excluded from the discussion. Your boss, who is a member of the executive group, relays the decision to you the next morning. You are amazed and angered by this unilateral decision. What is the first thing you say?

Your boss has asked you to supervise an uncollegial and uncongenial librarian. This prickly librarian has a few key supporters, including some wealthy donors, but over a long career his Jekyll and Hyde personality has alienated

many of the library staff. Firing him is not an option. Instead, he's been administratively marginalized into special projects and other solo work. After you agree to take on this shepherding assignment, your boss still bad-mouths this individual. And, there are others on the staff who nit-pick at the man's efforts. You feel like there is no support for your working with this person. At the least you want your boss' negative comments to stop. What do you say to your boss?

What you say in either of these cases will depend largely on the climate for dissent in your organization. If trust prevails, you can put some fire in your voice, and not be too anxious about repercussions.

Without trust and collegial support, your options are much more limited, but you can still express yourself with dignity. In the former case, you can indicate what you feel by being excluded and, by extrapolation, explain to your immediate boss how your staff will feel. Is an unnecessary distraction and downturn in production really what the executive group wants? In the prickly librarian case, you can ask for your boss' support in your supervising this person's work over the next few years. If you are to have any positive influence, the denigration has to stop.

Is your red card at the ready?



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