

# How to disagree tactfully

When you hear an incorrect statement, do you blurt out “that’s wrong” without skipping a beat? That’s not always a wise move.

Smart managers choose when and how to express gentle yet forceful disagreement, especially when they’re talking with their bosses. They quickly calculate what’s to gain or lose by contradicting what’s said. Then they respond accordingly.

Here are three strategies to disagree gracefully, along with the situations where each tactic makes sense:

**The invitation to redirect.** If you’re certain that a higher-up just said something wrong—and you figure that by speaking out you can enhance your stature or avoid costly hassles or misunderstandings— then you can preface your remarks by saying “If I’m not mistaken...” or “Correct me if I’m wrong...” or “Tell me if I’m off-base here, but...”

Insert a supportive statement first, such as “You’re onto something there” or “I see your point.” That way, you lower defenses and pave the way for what you’re about to say.

**The clarifying question.** Through polite, non-accusatory questioning, you can help others realize for themselves that they’re wrong. This is a useful technique whether you’re talking with a subordinate or a head honcho. You’ll radiate intelligence without arrogance.

Examples of questions to ask: “Are you factoring in other considerations such as...?” or “Could you define what you mean by \_\_\_\_, because I may be defining it differently?” Or you might ask, “Just to clarify, you said \_\_\_\_\_. Is that right?”

**The blunt contradiction.** If you want to showcase your bold, blustery side, then it’s fine to take the plunge and tell a speaker “I believe that’s incorrect.” Just make sure that the other person is thick-skinned and willing to learn from you. If pride or ego interfere, then your risky move may backfire and you may alienate a potential ally.

Above all, disagree without sounding disagreeable. Don’t sigh or grimace as you address others. Speak in a pleasant, conversational tone. Beware of adopting an overly serious or professorial demeanor as you prepare to contradict someone. Your goal is to establish trust by reinforcing the fact that you’re both in the same boat, searching for answers together without trying to tally who’s right or wrong.