



## What To Do When You Disagree With Your Boss



**When or how to disagree with your boss can be a sticky-wicket so to speak.**

Do you just follow orders? Do you let him/her know your sentiments? Will it hurt your career and your relative position in the eyes of the boss?

The answer is not one-size-fits all – that's for sure. Here are some things to think about and consider as you decide how you want to address your disagreement.

I always said that if I ever decided to go for a PhD, I would write my dissertation on what changes within people when they move into management. My colleagues and I often observed that people's



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The mission of the Maine Women's Conference is to draw women together to connect, educate, inspire, and empower one another to assume new and expanded roles in the workforce, our

perspectives changed when they became managers. The people we thought we knew seemingly became different people when they moved into management. Well, I don't have a PhD and never wrote a dissertation on the subject, but as I grew into a leadership position, and acquired more experience and wisdom, I found many of the answers to this mystery.

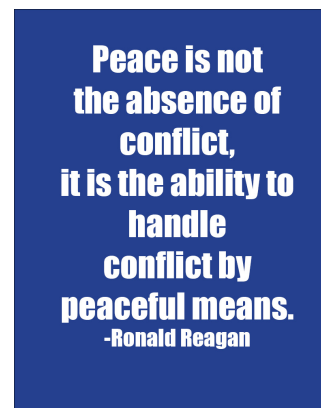
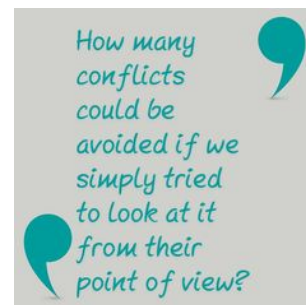
For starters, it's important to understand some things about the boss's world and what they deal with. Middle managers in particular are dealing with directives from above and sometimes information they are not permitted to share with direct reports. They are also trying to support their direct reports, meet their needs, and sometimes run interference for them with upper management. They are in a sandwich role, and often what's coming from above and below them creates difficult situations requiring careful decisions that often don't please everyone. It can be a lonely place to be and sometimes managers have no one to talk to when they need to vent or they're trying to figure out the best move in politically-complicated situations.

Managers are privy to information about your colleagues that you are not. They are approached about confidential situations and have to make decisions based on things they know that no one else does. As a result, sometimes their decisions, when taken at face value, don't seem logical or fair and can leave people confused. It's easy to think they're making a bad decision.

For example, maybe it seems that they are favoring a particular employee, cutting them slack for being late, giving them easier projects, or not coming down on them for something they came down on someone else for. Well, maybe the boss has been approached by that employee and is now aware that

lives and communities.

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they are dealing with a very serious family problem, or maybe even a health problem of their own. It may be temporary, but in the meantime, the boss knows that this is a valuable employee and decides to provide extra support to help this person through a really tough time. If it were you, wouldn't you appreciate the same?

### So, I have four suggestions:

1. Start in learning mode
2. Check your own biases and motives
3. Decide what the boss wants in this situation
4. Use a non-confrontational approach




#### 1. Start in learning mode

When you are trying to figure out what to do, start in a learning mode. For example, you could ask something like this: "There are some factors/issues/concerns which I'm curious about. I'd like to learn more about your perspective to help me understand your decision as it relates to \_\_\_\_\_. Or, words to that effect. Instead of being confrontational, or letting the boss know you disagree with his/her decision right up front, start by being genuinely curious, then ask thoughtful questions and listen openly. You may get an answer that satisfies you, and you may not. Check your tone of voice, so even if you're saying the right words, you aren't sounding like you are challenging their perspective.

Here's another question you can ask. "Would you be willing to share what factors you took into consideration and how you analyzed the issue when making your decision? I am curious and would like to learn what I can from you." Think about this: your boss is at a career level higher than you. What can you learn that may help you get to that level or help

WE FIGHT,  
NOT BECAUSE WE  
TRULY DISAGREE.  
BUT RATHER  
BECAUSE  
WE FAIL TO  
UNDERSTAND  
ONE ANOTHER.  
-DOUGLAS RICE

BEFORE YOU ASSUME,  
LEARN THE FACTS.  
BEFORE YOU JUDGE,  
UNDERSTAND WHY.  
BEFORE YOU HURT  
SOMEONE, FEEL.  
BEFORE YOU SPEAK,  
THINK.

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IT IS NOT A  
CHARACTER FLAW IF  
I DON'T AGREE WITH  
YOU, AND  
RESPECTING MY  
OPINION DOES NOT  
TAKE AWAY FROM  
YOURS.

WE ALL  
WORRY ABOUT  
LOSING CREDIBILITY  
WHEN WE  
ADMIT  
WE ARE WRONG  
BUT WITH  
APOLOGIES  
YOU ACTUALLY  
GAIN CREDIBILITY.  
-MICHELE LAWRENCE

you after you get to that level?

## 2. Check your own biases and motives

Before you run off to the boss to give him/her a piece of your mind or do something you'll regret later, take a breath and think about why you disagree with the boss. Are you judging his/her motives? We never know what another person's motives are, but as humans we sure love to presume that we do. Most times it doesn't lead anywhere good. Slow down here. You may think you know some things, but do you really? Could there be other motives that are purely good? What factors might have affected the decision that you might not know about? Are you unhappy with the decision because of how it affects just you? What's the flip side of that coin? You might not like something now, but what might be the benefits to you or others in the long run? Perspective is a tricky part of the work place. Others have very different perspectives, and we can make bad decisions because of faulty assumptions.

## 3. Decide what the boss wants in this situation

Even the most collaborative bosses have a moment or a situation where they just want you or need you to carry out a directive without challenging them. In those cases, it may be one of those times where they have a good reason and there's information they cannot share with you. If this is a boss you value and who is usually pretty good, then cut him/her some slack this time and do what they ask. If it's a not-so-great boss, or even a jerk, then challenging his/her decision may get you into hot water, so think long and hard before challenge him/her.

On the other hand, is your boss someone who is collaborative and wants feedback? That's a different

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situation and talking to him/her with the right approach and attitude may be helpful to everyone. Is this a boss who appreciates the “critical friend”?

Another consideration is what your relationship is with the boss. Are you a new employee who doesn't have much political capital built up yet? Then it might be best to sit back, watch and learn how your colleagues handle the situation. Are you in a collaborative team environment where your input is desired and the boss really wants to hear people's thoughts? Are you a respected employee with longevity who does have the political capital to be the “critical friend” to the boss? Maybe a conversation over lunch or a drink or behind closed doors could be helpful to the boss.

#### **4. Use a non-confrontational approach**

When you do decide to disagree with or challenge your boss, it's still good to do it carefully and slowly. Listen at every opportunity and keep assessing the situation as you go along. You might start by saying something like, “I don't know that I necessarily agree with you on/about \_\_\_\_\_. Are you interested in hearing my thoughts? ” Be logical, objective and caring. Choose your words and tone carefully so that you come across as being helpful rather than challenging. Present your disagreement with helpful data, examples or information. Share with the boss the possible consequences you see to his/her decision. Then listen again. In the end, remember, he or she is the boss and you are the subordinate. Have you ever heard the term “insubordination”? It can be grounds for discipline or discharge, so in the end, you have to do what the boss is directing you to do.

If you are seeking first to understand (One of Steven Covey's “Seven Habits of Highly Effective People”),

are respectful, give clear, well-thought-out reasons and arguments, are objective and clearly show a motive of trying to be helpful to him/her personally and to the organization, you have a higher probability of your boss reacting favorably – if not to your ideas, at least to you as an employee.

**Best Wishes,**



**Do you need to talk  
through a sticky-wicket situation?  
Contact me for some coaching assistance.  
I'm happy to help and be your sounding board.**

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