

Diversity in Practice *Disagreeable and agreeable*

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Nextions



Many politicians from Barry Goldwater to Barack Obama have embraced the notion that "you can disagree without being disagreeable." Inherent in these sparse but punchy words is that being disagreeable is a bad thing.

In late July and early August of this year, as the debt ceiling negotiations crossed every line of disagreement and disagreeableness that American politics has drawn over the past few decades, the electorate quickly downgraded its opinion of the president, Congress and everyone even remotely connected with the disagreeable debacle. We wanted our politicians to disagree if they must, but we did not want them to be disagreeable while they disagreed.

If you scan the political polls and voters' sentiment, it seems that we really abhor disagreeableness, and we will consequently think less of people who behave in this way. If being disagreeable is a negative thing, people who decide to be disagreeable do so at peril to their careers, right? Actually, not quite.

Even though the overall rates of satisfaction with our politicians and their behaviors have been plummeting for years, the majority of politicians get re-elected again and again. We focus on the minority of individuals who lose their fights for re-election, but the majority of incumbents stay incumbents even though we find them disagreeable. We don't like disagreeable behavior, but we reward it nonetheless.

A recent study by Beth A. Livingston (Cornell University), Timothy A. Judge (University of Notre Dame) and Charlice Hurst (University of West Ontario) found that disagreeable men make 18.31 percent (almost \$10,000 a year) more than agreeable men. As a man, the nicer you are, the less you make!

According to the researchers, disagreeable men make more money because the disagreeableness validates our social perceptions of strength, confidence, assertiveness and other "masculine traits" in men. Disagreeable men are perceived as more manly men. We may not like how they behave, but we reward them in business just as we do in politics.

Interestingly, the compensation gap for disagreeable versus agreeable women is only 5.47 percent (less than \$2,000 a year). Even more interestingly, the most agreeable of the guys still make more money than the most disagreeable of women. As Judge, one of the researchers, states, "We found there is a penalty for being agreeable in the workplace. But, while men earn a premium for being disagreeable, women don't. If you're a disagreeable man, you're considered a tough negotiator. But, the perception is, that if a woman is agreeable, she gets taken advantage of and if she is disagreeable, she's considered a control freak or the b-word."

As I digested this study's findings and reached out to a few senior leaders (men and women) to get their reactions, I could not find anyone who disagreed with this data. One person even said he employed "strategic disagreeableness" when he knew that getting his way would be an uphill battle. Another person laughed at the fact that an academic study needed to demonstrate what people in business have always known to be true.

In predominantly male contexts such as politics and legal workplaces, if being disagreeable is profitable for men, what implications does this have for creating inclusive work environments for men and women alike? Do inclusive work environments need to be agreeable environments or is disagreeableness something that needs to be included (even embraced) as a component of inclusion? Through my work in leadership and in inclusion I've realized that we have unfairly coupled disagreement and disagreeableness and we have equally unfairly attached a positive attribute to the former and a negative attribute to the latter. While constructive disagreement is indeed a positive force that allows for innovative thinking, disagreeableness is really just a neutral attitude or trait that some people adopt as they go about their daily work. By attaching a negative taint to someone being disagreeable, we make the dialogue about the attitude and not the outcome.

I have worked with some organizations where leaders have been in disagreeable agreement and move forward with a unified vision, albeit disagreeably. On the other hand, I have worked with organizations where leaders have agreeably had false agreement and they move forward with a fractured vision and smiles on their faces. Inclusive workplaces can be created with disagreeable agreement, but they cannot work with agreeable disagreement.

While research shows that disagreeable people (mostly men) are compensated better than agreeable people, an inclusion lens on this data reminds us to look at what these disagreeable people accomplished instead of dismissing them as discordant with diversity and inclusion simply because they are disagreeable. While agreement or disagreement tells us what the destination is, agreeable or disagreeable merely indicates the mode of transportation we use to get to the destination. The right mode can get us to the right destination faster, but the right mode does us no good if we are headed to the wrong place. We can disagree without being disagreeable, and it would be great if we can agree while being agreeable. I am also perfectly fine if we can reach agreement while being thoroughly disagreeable.