



Please Help Me Understand

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

On a daily basis, we experience situations where we are at odds with the actions or words of other people. It is human nature to disagree with other people at times. How we handle ourselves when this happens determines our quality of life, because it will establish how the rest of the world reacts to us.

John Wooden, the iconic basketball coach of UCLA, used to challenge his teams to learn to "disagree without being disagreeable." We need to find the words to signal a disconnect without short-circuiting relationships. If you listen to people as they interface about their differences, you will hear all kinds of phrases that cause an increase in heat within the conversation. Here is a small set of examples you will recognize:

- What makes you think that...
- How could you possibly believe that...
- Who died and made you the queen of...
- You are not only wrong, you are stupid if you...
- What part of "NO" don't you understand....
- Don't you see! My way is better because...
- You never listen to me...
- If you believe that, I have a bridge to sell you...

There are millions of ways to humiliate other people when we disagree with their words or actions. Note that the statement may be current or past, written or verbal, and the action may be historical, or something that just occurred. What we need to do is suppress the human urge to blast the other individual and seek a more politic way to have an adult conversation.

The four word phrase, "Please help me understand..." is an excellent one to use as long as it is not given with a sarcastic tone of voice. Reason: The phrase does not start by putting the other person down. It is shorthand for a message indicating open mindedness but also some confusion about what the other person is saying or doing. It

does not assume the other person is clueless, underhanded, dishonest, or has any other character flaw. The phrase simply asks for more information. It calls into question the action or statement without violating the other person. It may not work in every application, since we are all different. Some individuals might even read something negative into the phrase. I think it has a lot to do with what is in the heart of the sender.

By sending a polite signal about a disconnection with the other person, it gives him or her time to rethink what was said or done to see if it was too edgy. Often just this little nudge will cause the person to reframe the action or statement into something more reasonable. It is also an honest way to stop the conversation for a gut check on reality.

When you are tempted to blast a co-worker for something said, written, or done, think about saying "Please help me understand," and you will see a more helpful and constructive reaction in most cases.

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