

NON-OPPOSITIONAL DISAGREEMENT

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We often feel that when our views differ from another's, and particularly where the stakes are high or the emotions are strong, we have only these choices: stifle our own views, oppose the other's views, or try to persuade or argue the other to our position. Non-oppositional disagreement does not follow any of these patterns. It does not suggest that you become a doormat for others, that you go to war for your side, nor that you engage in a struggle to convince the other that you are right. It considers that our primary goal is to come to appropriate action on an issue, or make a wise and compassionate decision, or share multiple perspectives to deepen understanding. It considers the process by which our disagreements become known a helpful one, which illuminates difficulties or reasoning outside of our own awareness. At the same time, it recognizes that our own perspective is based on the experience and intelligence we bring to the situation. Here are some features of non-oppositional disagreement.

Non-oppositional disagreement

- Does not make judgments of good or bad for either persons or ideas, groups or institutions
- Considers understanding, wisdom, and right action as emergent properties of human interaction, experience, and reflection
- Considers differences of perspective, even those strongly or rigidly held, as natural, healthy, and desirable for all social systems
- Maintains curiosity, openness, willingness to listen and to learn, even when firmly maintaining a particular perspective
- Appreciates the strengths, insights, and limitations of every point of view of position
- Considers disagreement a process of mutually seeking truth, meaning, right action, appropriate responses, rather than a conflict between right and wrong, good and evil, best and worst
- Is not attached to outcomes
- Seeks clarity, not victory; that which benefits life over that which ignores or tramples over it; that which sustains and strengthens relationship over that which destroys it.
- Affirms the highest aspirations of all participants, even where there are sharp differences of judgment, interpretation, opinion
- Recognizes the possibility that there is no such thing as fixed, abiding Truth, that all formulations are necessarily partial, provisional, temporary working constructs.

Some frames for setting the stage include statements like these:

- Well, I do have an opinion on this subject, but I have an open mind and I'm interested in hearing other points of view. I've been misguided in the past, like anyone else. The process of getting clarity together is always helpful for me.
- I wonder if you might be curious about a quite different perspective?

For more charged situations, something like this might be helpful:

- You have made some really important points and it's clear you feel strongly about this issue. I have a strong feelings, too, from a different point of view, and I have a concern that these strong feelings we are experiencing have the potential to lead us into conflict, when what we both want is to figure out somehow, how to respond appropriately to what is needed. Can we agree together on some ground rules for our discussion? Then you might describe what such ground rules might look like from your point of view. For example:

I'm thinking, specifically, that I would like to be able to speak without being interrupted, that I may express the emotions I'm experiencing, freely without others taking it personally, and I will do the same. I also think it might be helpful to set a time limit for the discussion, so that everyone recognizes some shared boundaries. You might also have a ground rule that *only* the issue at hand be discussed, without dragging past grievances, collateral issues, or future hypotheticals.