

Leading in Context

Article

Are You an “I’m Right” Leader or an “I’m Listening” Leader?

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In our complex world, there will always be disagreements on issues. We come from different backgrounds, have different hopes, dreams and goals and we see things through unique perspectives. It is good to be our authentic selves, and to feel strongly about things that matter to us. That is who we are. Isn’t it also good for people we disagree with to be authentic? To feel strongly about things that matter? That is who they are. Now we enter the difficult zone. Two people, each passionate about an issue, disagreeing with one another. How we handle ourselves when disagreements like this arise will tell people a lot about us as a leader.

Whether the disagreement is about practical things or lofty ideals, we have a choice about how we handle it. A choice that often determines whether or not the conversation or the relationship will continue. Leadership, by its nature, is not all about the leader, after all. It is about relationships. Trying to prove that you’re right all of the time just doesn’t build relationships. Let’s look at two examples of leader responses to disagreement.

The “I’m Right” Leader

The “I’m Right” Leader seeks to justify existing beliefs and doesn’t make room for the possibility that other people’s beliefs are important. This type of leader may do things like:

- Get louder and repeat the same points
- Refuse to acknowledge that there are other perspectives
- Refuse to admit that the issue is complex and that the other person could be right
- Discredit the other person to try to seem more credible
- Wield power
- Use name-calling

When you don’t agree with someone, trying to discredit them or wield power is the easy way out. It justifies what you believe. It makes you feel smugly right. It confirms that the universe as you understand it is just the way you left it. It is an entrenchment, based on an unwillingness to understand the other person’s perspective. It’s an approach that is not considered responsible leadership. Leaving no room for the ideas of others rules out many variables critical for business success, including employee satisfaction, employee retention, customer satisfaction and innovation.

The “I’m Listening” Leader

The leader who refuses to acknowledge that there are other important perspectives is out of date in our complex working world. There is another way that leads to better workplaces (and to happier leaders). It is much more difficult and also more rewarding. It involves really listening to the other person to see what you can learn from their perspective. In order to accomplish it, you must acknowledge that you do not have all of the answers. This type of leader may do things like:

- Know that there are multiple perspectives and try to understand them
- Listen and learn
- Ask questions
- Discuss the complex issues
- Honor the opinions of others, and not feel threatened by them.

The “I’m Listening” Leader knows that life is complex, that we do not see all of the possible perspectives at one time, and that having all of the answers is impossible. With that perspective, listening is a way to gather the information that will be needed to make key business decisions and to build the kinds of relationships and healthy workplaces that lead to innovation and long-term business success.

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