

AGREEABLE DISAGREEMENT

We are born to see the world in our own way, through our own eyes.

We are bound to experience that what we see is the way it is.

We can't help but wonder why others don't see things the same way: Shouldn't "reality" be just as real to everyone?

The most puzzling aspect of human relationships is disagreement about the way it is, which becomes conflict – even argument, and occasionally violence -- when being right about the way it is becomes urgently important.

Making the assumption that our own eyes do not deceive us, that there is an observable and uniformly perceived external reality, is the primary cause of disagreement. It seems that other people are missing something. They must be wrong. They can be persuaded. If we work at it hard enough and if we argue strongly enough, they will see it right. How could others miss what's so obvious to us? What's their problem? How can we "fix" them so they see it the way we see it, the right way?

We elevate our frustration level in an attempt to point outside ourselves to something that is so absolutely clear to us that it is impossible to imagine it looks entirely different to someone else.

Every technique that I am aware of in the field of "conflict resolution" is based on the assumption that there is something immutable and real over which people are in disagreement and that people's perception of that something must be addressed somehow for conflict to be resolved. Every technique I am aware of tries to address the questions raised in the previous paragraph. Conflict resolution information generally offers alternatives, from winners and losers (one party's reality prevails, even though the other party doesn't see it at all), to compromise (both parties "adjust" their perceptions until they arrive at a version of the perception that is OK with both), to alignment (both parties dialogue respectfully about their perceptions until they arrive at a deeper idea which includes both perceptions).

All of these techniques "work" in the sense that if the parties involved *think* the solution is acceptable, the particular conflict is resolved. Every time a new conflict arises, however, parties who learn these techniques have to go back to the technique and start over. So it might also be said that none of these techniques "work" in the sense that none of them address the true source of conflict. None of them prepare people to understand disagreement in a fundamental way that allows them to see conflict from a different

perspective that provides a vision for engagement in disagreement without conflict, and resolution without distress or analysis.

We are so accustomed to thinking of conflict as a “real” problem, however, that when someone points in a new direction, the usual question is “Ok, what’s the technique for this one? How do we “do” this?” Our minds turn to the action steps, not to the assumption behind the action, the philosophical understanding of what makes this, or any, problem real.

What we call disagreement or conflict is a natural outcome of the way life works. It is not only natural, but absolutely certain, that no two people will ever see the same world the same way. Differences arise from within our minds as soon as we think of something because every person’s thinking is entirely different. We are all the thinkers of our own thoughts, thinking for ourselves, seeing our own version of life.

We can all agree, for example, on the general “reality” we’re experiencing together. If a group of people is sitting in a room with white walls and ceiling fans and a gray carpet, it is unlikely anyone will argue that there is no room, or that the walls are purple, or that the fans are beehives, or that the carpet is tile. But if someone asked people to talk about their own experience of the room, it would immediately become clear that no two people see the world the same way. People would express ideas about the appeal or lack of appeal of that particular combination of objects. People would find that the fans reminded them of something. Some might say the carpet was dull. Others might say it was a restful color. Some might say they didn’t care. Others would suggest decorating touches.

As long as the conversation was all in fun – just a way to see how interesting people’s thinking is and how fascinating differences can be – it could go on at length and people could actually enjoy seeing how many ideas came to the surface and enjoy exploring others’ ways of seeing things. Differences would not matter at all.

That’s actually how we spend most of our time in life, talking about things with other people, having no need to see our differences as significant and just taking pleasure in our own and others’ continual generation of new ideas. The fact that we see life in our own ways doesn’t matter most of the time. Actually, it keeps life interesting and enriches relationships, and we simply take it for granted.

But going back to our example, let’s say the group was sitting in that same room because they had been called together as the Committee on Room Improvement, and their task was to determine how to make the room more suitable for a certain purpose and how limited resources should be expended for that improvement. Now, differences are raised to the level of opinion and factors in decision-making. Now, people become evaluative, rather than observational. Now, it starts to matter whose reality prevails, and how the discussion ends. Now, it’s harder for people to listen with interest and curiosity to others’

ideas as they come up because it's more important for them to get their own idea on the table and try to prevail. People would call this a "real" issue and become increasingly committed to certain "right" answers as the discussion proceeded.

Conflict would arise to the degree that there were gaps between the answers proposed because people would become more and more attached to their own thinking and find it harder and harder to bridge those gaps. When that happens, in any group, each person starts finding others in the room "difficult" or "stubborn" or "out of it". The focus of the conversation moves away from the amazing capacity people have to come up with and express diverse ideas and moves more and more deeply into analysis of the details of various ideas. The power of thought is redirected from appreciation of idea generation to determination to stick with or prevail about the content of certain ideas.

This is the point at which an understanding of the true nature of our differences, and thus the true source of conflict, could change everything. The at-stake feeling, the intensity, comes from attachment to our own ideas, not from reflection on ideas regardless of their origin. Attachment is a form of pressure we create within our own minds. It is an idea *about* our own ideas. The more we think about our own ideas and the significance of our own ideas, the more we lose sight of the power to continue to have new ideas and the understanding that we are all having exactly the same experience of our thinking. When there is conflict, there is attachment to ideas without reference to any understanding of where ideas come from and how real each person's ideas are for that person. We lose respect for the nature of "reality" as an individual thought-created experience that is unique to all people as we become more and more engrossed in the particular reality we have created. We forget that what looks true and absolute to us may not even have occurred to anyone else, but that something we haven't even considered may look true and absolute to someone else.

When this happens, it's like getting lost in a maze of our own creation. We can't find the exit and we can't remember how we got into it, either. Moving out of this situation is just like finding the answer to a maze. Common sense tells us we need greater perspective – we need to step back and look at the whole pattern and reorient ourselves. When we are "lost" in conflict, the answer is not to push harder, rush more deeply into it, think about it in greater detail, frighten ourselves or blame others. The answer is to slow down, step back, and look for the humility to see that we created our own maze and we're in it alone. That is the nature of creation. We all use our thinking to create experience in the same way – we just don't create the same experience.

Calming down rather than raising the intensity of our argument simply restores the natural thinking process so that we are able to listen, to reflect, and to appreciate what all people have in common. We're all making it up as we go and believing in what we've made up while it's on our mind. No one's ideas are intrinsically more important or more right than anyone else's, even though they may look that way to the thinker who thought

them. Yet all people can “see”, when they’re not looking to be right, that many different ideas might work just as well as others. And people can become reflective enough to see what works best at this moment, for this particular purpose.

In any discussion about disagreement that needs to be resolved with a commonly acceptable answer, the most important ingredients are understanding, appreciation and respect for the way we think and hold our thoughts. When that understanding prevails, people are able to sustain a respectful and open state of mind – what we call “good tone” – in a meeting. Out of appreciation for sharing the generation of one thought after another with others, people find common ground in the very process of thinking, and ideas tend to surface as “obvious” or “simple” or “wise.” Often, in this kind of discussion, the ideas that a group adopts seem to have no “owner” but to have arisen from the group. The focus is not on credit or blame or who said what, but simply on the dynamic of creation.

In these kinds of discussions, which almost everyone has experienced at one time or another and thought of as “magical” or “special,” people are at their best and there is no such thing as conflict and no need for conflict resolution. No energy is sapped by the personal effort of arguing a point or defending an idea. All energy flows to the point, nurturing each other’s creativity in the spirit of seeing the best answer together.

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