"Stop Arguing!"

Godfrey.York@Creatifica.com

Reaching agreements elegantly is the key to harmonious business relationships, and it's all about "logical levels"!

Have you ever felt that you're in a situation where you're stuck in a seemingly endless argument? You know the frustrations … "Why can't they just be reasonable and listen to what I'm saying? Why can't they simply see the sense of my point of view? Why can't they just agree with me for once?" And you know where it often leads – frustration, raised voices, resentment – none of which actually help. There's often no way forward, so you either stop trying to reach agreement, capitulate or "agree to disagree" – never a good result.

Would you like to be able to reach agreements with others easily and elegantly? Is that something that you'll find valuable?

First of all though let's stop, and consider how the argument could have arisen anyway. How can two parties find it so easy to disagree? Without getting all Pythonesque[1] about it, few people really get satisfaction from disagreeing, do they?

Disagreements (or the more energetic form – arguments) tend to happen when different models of the world meet. Everyone's model of the world is a product of lots of things, such as:

- All of the experiences they've had
- Their values
- Their beliefs
- Their attitudes

…and much more besides.

Now of course these tend to interact as well, so your experiences will have influenced your beliefs and, conversely your beliefs will have influenced your experiences. For example, if you fundamentally believe that you can't do something then you will always be denying yourself the possibility of that experience.

Your self-concept is based upon how you organise and think about your memories of your experiences. The first thing that you do when you think about those memories is to select from your huge database of experiences – there are simply too many for you to think about

all of them consciously at any moment in time. That means you'll ignore those memories that don't support your self-concept.

So, if you think of yourself as someone who is able to be a great presenter, then you'll select those experiences that support that belief, even though you may well have had experiences to the contrary.

Conversely if you believe that you're a poor presenter then you'll selectively ignore all those experiences where you discovered that your presentations went really well.

The problem is that your description of your self-concept is just a map. Like all maps, it's not the actually territory, just one representation of it. So your perception of a situation is never the same as someone else's – it can't be.

Likewise, the words that we all use to "label" our experiences carry with them all of *our* database of experiences and representations of those experiences. They're not really "the events" – just a label and it may be a bad one.

Recognising these facts is a great place to begin working towards understanding the real issues around the disagreement. What we need is a way to probe the other person's model of the world and uncover the real differences that are at the root of the disagreement. So, how do we do that?

Well, **first** of all we need to accept that the other person's model of the world is different to our own and respect it. Telling them they're "wrong" or they've "misunderstood" or their perception is "incorrect" will always move you away from agreement. Afterall, you're directly criticising their model of reality!

Secondly we should appreciate that people can talk at different "logical levels", looking at problems at a completely different level of abstraction. This always causes people to perceive problems differently.

As an example let's consider a library. I can talk about a library on a number of different logical levels:

---

[1] E.g. One of many Monty Python Argument sketch links!

- The importance of an information repository within society or within an organisation and the role it fulfils.

- The practices that the library embodies – cataloguing, classifying, archiving, supplying information, etc.

- The physical space occupied by a library – its shape, facilities, cost and so forth.

- The information resources within the library – at a collection level. So I could say this is a bioscience collection or an electrical engineering collection for example.

- The specific resources within the library – the specific books, journals and so on.

As you go down the levels you'll see that the level of detail increases – I become much more specific and could even begin talking about actual things and not abstract concepts.

You and I could both be talking about libraries at a completely different level of abstraction, each correct but with very big differences in our perspective. These differences would inevitably lead to misunderstandings, disagreements and even arguments.

To achieve an agreement both parties need to move to a higher logical level that includes all of the individuals' concerns, perceptions, and frames of reference.

Thirdly, use your language carefully. It's most helpful to preface your points with these words:

- "I appreciate, and…."

- "I respect, and…"

- "I agree, and…"

Avoid using the word "but" because it effectively dismisses anything the other person has said as incorrect – a challenge to their model of the world. This could easily lead to even deeper disagreement.

So, having taken all of that on board, here's the outline of a simple process. You can follow this next time you need to establish an agreement.

1. Ask each person for a description of his or her outcome. Ask them what they want specifically; what's really important to them about this goal. Determine what beliefs, values and criteria for success are driving their goal. Build a model of their world.

   This has the effect of gathering important information as well as getting everyone involved and feeling that they are being listened to. It also begins the task of constructing the framework of high-level outcomes.

2. Identify common higher ground and acknowledge it. If we're disagreeing about a new chair for our home for example, we might say something like: "You want a yellow chair and I want a green one. It seems that, at least, we agree on buying a chair, yes?" By talking about the higher-level outcome both parties will move to that point. And isn't that what we do when we "agree to disagree" a common outcome in politics. So how do we move to agreement over the issues from there?

3. If there's no common ground to be found then identify a higher level where you can agree. "We both agree that we need some kind of furniture, right?"

4. Having formed agreement at this higher level you can now check the detail. Use what you know about each party's drivers for the outcome (from step 1) to build a higher-level agreement framework. You can ask questions like:

   a. "By doing [agreed thing], what will that do for you personally?"

   b. "So, everyone wants [agreed thing]?"

5. Check that everyone's criteria will be acceptably satisfied by what's being proposed. To continue our chair-buying example, you could ask: "Would buying this yellow chair meet your criteria of comfortable and attractive?"

6. Confirm what's been agreed – continually identify and firm up all levels of agreement and their respective importance to the parties involved.

In summary, what you're doing in this process is identifying outcomes and criteria for their having been achieved. Then you move to increasingly higher logical levels until agreement is reached and then dropping back down through the levels of detail. All the time you need to confirm or reaffirm the agreements you've reached. If you hit a sticking point in the detail then go back to the last higher level where you had agreement and then move back down into the detail following a more mutually acceptable route. Easy isn't it?

Remember the golden rule, you can never solve a problem at the level of the problem – you must go to a higher level to reach agreement. This approach enables us to facilitate the process of reaching quality agreements whenever we're involved with conflict.

So, no more arguing! Start agreeing and do it elegantly. We've shown you how…