



Graphics: Luke Murphy

How to Practice Innovation As Much As Inclusion

By the Moral Courage Team

People with strong convictions typically hate being disagreed with. It gets in our way. It makes us uncomfortable. It should be avoided.

Well, maybe not. Being disagreed with can lead to clarity, creativity and innovation — all of which are healthy.

Take Martin Luther King Jr. The civil rights historian Taylor Branch points out that Dr. King's father often disagreed with his son. Daddy King railed against interracial cooperation because he feared that white folks would betray Martin Jr.

In April 1963, Dr. King and his posse were being prohibited from marching in Birmingham, Alabama. They had to decide whether to break the law. In that moment, Daddy King glared at Martin from across a table. He challenged junior to pack it in, come home and join the family for Easter.

Dr. King didn't react. Instead, he thought. Then he prayed. Then he put on a pair of blue jeans, effectively announcing to his preacher-father that he'd rather be in jail than at church. In effect, Daddy King's dissent spurred Dr. King to clarify why he believed what he believed — and recommit to it.

Likewise, according to the social scientist Sal Restivo, Albert Einstein built a network of diverse colleagues to push back on his ideas. Why would Einstein want to be disagreed with? Precisely so he could refine the very ideas for which he became famous.

Ditto for Abraham Lincoln. Marketing wizard Bob Burg notes that Lincoln the lawyer became trustworthy (and thus successful) in part by incorporating the other side's arguments into his own. Later, as America's president, he translated disagreement into the ultimate power-play, creating a cabinet of rivals whose divergent perspectives would lend credibility to the case for abolishing slavery.

If we truly want to move the needle on what we're passionate about, then it's wise to embrace disagreement as an opportunity instead of an obstacle. Of course, this is bumpy terrain to navigate. Let us equip you with three pieces of mental gear:



SHOVEL

When facing disagreement, you want to use your mental shovel to clear away the noise that's coming from your ego. Noise such as, "Oh no! You're about to die! Fight back or run like mad!"

The ego arises from the primitive part of our brains. Since its job is to keep us alive, the "egobrain" (as we call it) is constantly scanning for threats. It views all kinds of challenges as life-and-death struggles. All the more today, when social media and related factors throw the egobrain into hyperactive mode.

In this contentious context, many of us have normalized Us-against-Them debate as our default method of communication. Problem is, when we turn disagreement into a debate, our egobrain jumps into overdrive. That's because in a debate, there can be only one winner – and over your dead body (literally) will your ego let you "lose."

The same thing's happening in your opponent. Can you see how the clatter of each person's egobrain would drown out any hope of listening to each other?

Rein in your egobrain by pulling out that mental shovel and scraping away the debris of the win/lose mindset. In its place, you'll be adopting a new lens. Hence the next piece of mental gear...

The "egobrain" is constantly scanning for threats. It views all kinds of challenges as life-and-death struggles.



BINOCULARS

Having rejected the win/lose mindset, you're ready for a new perspective. And to get there, you'll have to be intentional, not impulsive. If you're impulsive, you'll lapse back under the sway of your egobrain.

So reach for you second piece of gear: binoculars. They'll provide a fresh lens in place of the win/lose frame. The new lens is both/and.

Here's what we mean. Even if your position is better than your opponent's, might your opponent have something to contribute? Something that you couldn't have thought of on your own? Something that, if considered, would make your point of view that much more compelling? Hello King, Einstein, and Lincoln.

In short, it's possible for you both to be right and to acknowledge that your Other has given you more to reflect on. The both/and lens lets you hear, not fear, contrary viewpoints. By adopting it, you lower your own emotional defenses and motivate the other side to do likewise. But remember: You have to go first. You're the one with all that gear.

Which brings us to the third too for practicing innovation alongside inclusion...



PULLEY

Your pulley has been patiently waiting for some attention. Use it to draw in your opponent even further. Here's why: Trust matters. Only with trust can disagreement become an invitation to further engagement. Only with trust can differences be discussed constructively. And only with trust can there be any hope of shared action.

One way to deploy your pulley? Tell your opponent that you have no right to judge them based on this particular disagreement. You recognize that your Other is so much more than one issue. Then ask them to remember the same about you. In doing so, you're cultivating common ground as well as fostering mutual trust.

A final thought: You might worry about compromising your values if you dig out of the win/lose trench and adopt the both/and lens. That's understandable. But discussion isn't capitulation. Listening isn't the same as agreeing.

Discussion is not capitulation. Listening is not the same as agreeing.

If anything, these three tools will make you a better communicator of your own views. After all, the iron-clad law of human psychology tells us that by giving a fair hearing to others, you're more likely to get a fair hearing in turn.

The key is Moral Courage — doing the right thing in the face of your fear. Which means speaking truth the power of your ego. And that truth is, “I respect you, ego. But right now, I won't be bullied or manipulated by you into becoming defensive. I won't die from being disagreed with. I might just learn something that benefits me.”

Beauty is, the impact of using these three mental tools goes far beyond you. It'll bring both innovation and inclusion to your workplace.

If you'd like to teach these skills to make your company, school, or organization healthier, then become a certified Moral Courage Mentor. Learn more at moralcourage.org.

