

# CUTTINGS...

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Compiled and edited by Geof Cox

Something a little different this time - one main article only. But it is a significant piece of analysis applied to how we have become more polarised in our responses and the impact that has on relationships and outcomes. We are in more conflict than ever, and we need to take the initiative to have more productive arguments and look for more of a win:win outcome. The longer article which I have summarised links a lot of excellent research and is well worth a read.

Alongside this main article are some quotations and a longer thought provoker about savouring the positive.

If you would like a downloadable pdf of this edition. it is published on my website, along with copies of all past editions, [click here](#).

Enjoy, and stay healthy and safe...

*Geof Cox*

## Have better arguments online (and face to face when allowed!)

The troubled times we live in, and the rise of social media, have created an age of endless conflict. It won't go away, so rather than fearing or avoiding disagreement, we need to understand it and learn to do it well.

Technology is at least partially responsible for a world in which we do ever more talking and ever less listening. Readers are more likely to comment on an article or post, have more to say, and tend to get more animated when they disagree. When we agree we usually just say 'I agree' or post a simple agree emoji.

We are increasingly living 'low-context' lives... Anthropologist Edward T Hall introduced the distinction between high context and low context communication culture. In a low-context culture, communication is explicit and direct. What people say is taken to be an expression of their thoughts and feelings. You don't need to understand the context – who is speaking, in what situation – to understand the message. A high-context culture is one in which little is said explicitly, and most of the message is implied. The meaning of each message resides not so much in the words themselves, as in the context. Communication is oblique, subtle, ambiguous.

### In this edition

**Have better arguments online (and face to face when allowed!)** - an excellent analysis on why we have become more polarised in our discussions and what to do about it.

Plus **Snippets** with some quotations and a longer thought provoker to encourage your thinking and reflection, and details of **Book Sales** from our secure **Online Shop**

## Snippets

### Some quotations...

"I distrust camels and anyone else who can go a week without a drink."  
Joe Lewis

"A desk is a dangerous place from which to view the world"  
John Le Carré

"We have the power to do any damn fool thing we want to do, and we seem to do it every ten minutes."  
Senator William Fulbright

"The time to relax is when you don't have time for it"  
Sydney Harris

"Simplicity is the end result of long, hard work; not the starting point."  
Frederick Maitland

"Just try to be decent"

Whatever our natural communication culture - whether low-context or high-context - the online world is pushing us to live increasingly low-context lives. We flock to cities, do business with strangers and converse over smartphones – forces that dissolve tradition, flatten hierarchy and increase the scope for confrontation. It's not at all clear that we are prepared for this as for most of our existence as a species, humans have operated in high-context mode. We lived in settled communities with shared traditions and clear chains of command. Now, we frequently encounter others with values and customs different to our own and, at the same time, demand an equal voice. Everyone expects their opinion to be heard. Previously implicit rules about what can and cannot be said are looser and more fluid, sometimes non-existent. With less context to guide our decisions, the number of things on which "we all agree" is very small.

If humans were purely rational entities, we would listen politely to an opposing view before offering a considered response. In reality we are hijacked by emotional responses; disagreement floods our brain with chemical signals that make it hard to focus on the issue at hand. The signals tell us that this is an attack on me. "I disagree with you" becomes "I don't like you". So, instead of opening our minds to the other's point of view, we focus on defending ourselves. This is the reality of the 'fight or flight' response to threat. A disagreement can tempt us to become aggressive and lash out, or it can induce us to back off and swallow our opinions out of a desire to avoid conflict. In today's low-context environments we either get into hostile and mostly pointless arguments, or do everything we can to avoid arguing at all. Both responses are rapid reflex actions and dysfunctional.

A lot of the emotional load comes from our perceptions about ourselves - 'face' - and whether we feel insecure about our relative status to the other party(ies) - 'one-down'.

"Face" is the public image a person wants to establish in a social interaction. We put effort into establishing the appropriate face for each encounter: the face you want to show a potential boss will be different to the face you want to show someone on a date. This effort is face-work. With people we trust and know well, we don't worry so much about face, but with those we don't know – especially when those people have some power over us – we put in the face-work. When someone puts in face-work and yet doesn't achieve the face they want, they feel bad. People skilled in the art of disagreement don't just think about their own face; they're highly attuned to the other's face. In any conversation, when the other person feels their desired face is being accepted and confirmed, they're going to be a lot easier to deal with, and more likely to listen to what you have to say.

'One-down' parties are more likely to act aggressively and competitively, at the expense of finding common ground or coming up with solutions. One-down parties often play dirty, attacking their adversary from unexpected, hard-to-defend angles. Instead of looking for solutions that might work for everyone, they see a zero-sum game in which someone must win and the other must lose. By contrast, those who perceive themselves to be in a stronger position (not one-down) tend to adopt a more relaxed and expansive approach, focusing on the substance of the disagreement and looking for win-win

*Wladyslaw Bartoszewski*

"People who love to eat are always the best people."

*Julia Child*

"Simply put, learning requires the humility to realise one has something to learn."

*Elizabeth Krumrei-Mancuso*

"If your actions create a legacy that inspires others to dream more, learn more, do more, and become more, then you are an excellent leader."

*Dolly Parton*

"The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any."

*Alice Walker*

"Entrepreneurship is neither a science nor an art. It is a practice."

*Peter Drucker*

***...and a longer thought provoker about savouring the positive***

When setting individual and team goals and targets, and giving feedback, look to build on success as well as solving problems. Take some time to reflect and savour the things the individuals and the organisation has done well and then use those examples as a model for building an even brighter future. Savouring success has been shown to support individuals' mental health, increase their happiness and job satisfaction and even prevent burnout when work is particularly challenging.

Five ways to build savouring in your team:

*Pause to notice the good.* We spend so much of our time at work caught up in what's gone wrong and what could go wrong that we often assume the worst. If we flip that negative thinking and talk purposefully about past successes our

solutions. They may also take more risks with their face, offering a more friendly and conciliatory dialogue that might otherwise be seen as weak. Since they don't fear losing face, they can reach out a hand. This is why giving face is so important. It is in a negotiator's interest for their counterpart to feel as secure as possible. Skilled negotiators are always trying to create the adversary they want. They know that when they're one-up, the smart thing to do is to narrow the gap.

In any conversation where there is an unequal power balance, the more powerful party is more likely to be focused on the top line – on the content or matter at hand – while the one-down party focuses on the relationship. For instance:

A parent says: "Why did you come home so late?" The teenage daughter thinks: "You're treating me like a little kid."

A doctor says: "We can't find anything wrong with you." The patient thinks: "You don't care about me."

A boss says: "We have some new targets to meet." An employee thinks: "Stop criticising me."

When a debate becomes volatile and dysfunctional, it's often because someone in the conversation feels they are not getting the face they deserve. This helps to explain the pervasiveness of bad temper on social media, which can sometimes feel like a status competition in which the currency is attention.

The same principle applies to workplace conflicts. In front of an audience of colleagues, people are more likely to focus on how they want to be seen, rather than on the right way to solve the problem. If it is important to me to be seen as competent, I might react angrily to any challenge to my work. If I want to be seen as cooperative, I might refrain from expressing my strong opposition to a proposal. In these situations we often propose to "take it offline", which has the unspoken meaning: "Let's take this potentially tough conversation to a place where there is less at stake for our faces."

Taking a disagreement offline can work, but it is a second-best option. It loses the benefits of open disagreement and the opportunity to explore the differences. The best way to lower the identity stakes is to create a workplace culture in which people do not feel the need to protect their face; a culture in which different opinions are explicitly encouraged, mistakes are expected, rules of conduct are understood, and everyone trusts that everyone else cares about the collective goal. Then you can really discuss it out.

When we're in an argument with someone, we should be thinking about how they can change their mind *and* look good – maintain or even enhance their face – at the same time. Often this is very hard to do in the heat of the moment of the dispute. However, if we start by showing that we have listened to and respected a different point of view first, we make it more likely that they will do the same at some later point. If and when they do, we should then avoid berating them for not agreeing with us in the first place - which is often too tempting in polarised debates; it hardly makes it more tempting to switch

feelings of satisfaction can increase our sense of efficacy and motivation for tackling other challenges.

*Add savouring to daily meetings.* The standard Agile questions: What was yesterday's work? What is today's work? What's in the way? automatically focus on the negative. Try adjusting your agenda at least once a week to poll team members about what things went really well, were surprisingly easy, or helped others. Thinking about good feelings for 10 to 30 seconds can actually shift a person's frame of mind much more effectively than asking them to "be positive."

*Emphasise enjoying time together.* It's hard for teams to feel good together in today's work-from-home environment. Look for occasions to spend a few minutes sharing happy news, both professional and personal, as part of a morning coffee hour, weekly happy hour or group meeting. These interactions create opportunities for employees to get to know each other better and create a reserve of trust to draw on when stress is high.

*Compare successful and unsuccessful experiences.* As well as post-mortems, retrospectives or reflection exercises to identify potential improvements, bring the conversation around to the aspects of initiatives and projects that went well. Take satisfaction in how good it felt to do well and think about how to trigger those kinds of positive feelings and experiences again.

*Recap successes publicly.* Successful people and groups often move on to the next thing too quickly and miss the opportunity to highlight your team's talents, dedication, and more personal involvement. Make sure to acknowledge the task achievement; to publicly thank person who gave everybody a lift and got the group through a bad patch. Everybody feels better being associated with a winning team, but it is too easy to forget the wins when you're already into a new challenge.

sides. Instead, we should remember that they have achieved something - an agreement instead of an ongoing conflict.

#### USEFUL LINKS

[Click here](#) to read the complete article by Ian Leslie in **The Guardian. Conflicted: Why Arguments Are Tearing Us Apart and How They Can Bring Us Together** by Ian Leslie has just been published by Faber

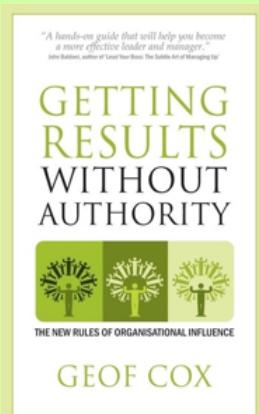
**New Directions** does not do hostage negotiation, but we do offer consultancy and training on win:win negotiation and handling conflict in organisations. For more information [Click here](#)

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[Click here](#) to read the full article in **Forbes**

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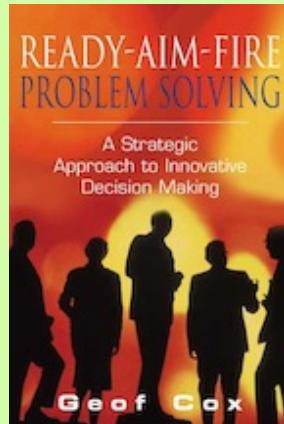
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It has been published continuously for more than 20 years by *New Directions*, an international network of consultants and trainers who work together to learn, research, design and provide consulting and training in individual, management, and organisation development.

#### USEFUL LINKS

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