Dare to Disagree

Margaret Heffernan
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Take-Aways

• Organizations should actively encourage employees to challenge each other and disagree with one another.

• Up to 85% of executives are afraid to draw attention to problematic issues at work.

• Conflict can be uncomfortable and risky, but “constructive conflict” can be crucial to problem solving.

• Teams should consist of diverse participants, and members should have the courage to stand up to authority and welcome diverging opinions.

• Embracing and navigating conflict forces you to question, analyze and reconsider your work and yields better solutions.

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Review

Getting people to embrace a different view is difficult, even when children’s lives are at stake. This is what Dr. Alice Stewart discovered when she undertook a 25-year battle to persuade the medical community to stop X-raying pregnant women. With this engaging story, seasoned entrepreneur and author Margaret Heffernan begins her valuable TED Talk about the necessity of conflict to force better solutions and drive change. getAbstract recommends Heffernan’s lecture to people in all fields and from every walk of life because “constructive conflict” leads to sounder solutions.

Summary

In the 1950s, Dr. Alice Stewart, an epidemiologist, studied the high incidents of childhood cancers. She found that a common denominator in most of the cases was that the mothers had undergone X-rays while pregnant. The study received a lot of attention, and Stewart rushed to corroborate her research before obstetrics practices changed and the cancers disappeared. However, her findings ran contrary to the beliefs of the medical community at the time, and doctors continued to X-ray expectant mothers for another 25 years. These professionals remained “willfully blind” to the readily available research.

Despite her industry’s unyielding response, Stewart knew she was right. Her collaborator, statistician George Kneale, helped her maintain confidence in her research by testing and trying to disprove it. He knew this process of “creating conflict” around her theories would help validate them. People from every field would benefit from the kind of “constructive conflict” Stewart encouraged in her own practice. Although collaborating with like-minded people is comfortable, seeking dissimilar opinions from those with different experience – “thinking partners who aren’t echo chambers” – is important to the integrity of your work.

Encouraging constructive conflict within organizations can be difficult. As many as 85% of executives are reluctant to raise issues at work. They worry about the consequences and fear they will lose the argument. Take Joe, an executive at a medical device company. He thought one of its emerging products was complicated to the point of being potentially harmful. Yet he hesitated to say so because no one else seemed to share his view. When he finally aired his concerns, he was surprised that many of his co-workers agreed with him. They revisited the drawing board and, after much discussion and argument, changed the device. His experience and Stewart’s provide lessons for people in all walks of life: Embrace constructive conflict as a way of thinking about a problem. Disputes force you to question, analyze and reconsider your work. Train yourself to view dispassionately the evidence that is so often right in front of you. Learn the skills that enable you to question the majority, stand up to authority, speak out and welcome contrary opinions. Only by doing so will you find the best solutions.

About the Speaker

Corporate speaker Margaret Heffernan is the former head of IPPA (now Pact), a film and television producer trade association. She is a former CEO of several e-commerce companies. She wrote Willful Blindness.

This summary is intended for the use of Macys employees.