JEWISH LEADERSHIP ACADEMY

7 Rules for Persuasive Dissent

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It's hard to be a dissenter. When you question widely accepted beliefs, you tend to experience far more pain than pleasure. People are likely to dismiss your opinions and reject you from future interactions. That's because groups prefer consensus. They want to have their existing views validated, maintain a predictable environment, and work quickly toward goals.

And yet, when you believe that your team or organization is missing something important, moving in the wrong direction, or taking too much risk, you need to speak up. Even if your message isn't received well in the short term, decisions formed from a diversity of opinions usually lead to better long-term outcomes.

Consider Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech. In the three years following it, a mere 33% of Americans approved of the content. But, over time, his public dissent on prevailing views about civil rights for Black Americans, led to big changes in laws and attitudes. By 2011, public approval for the speech jumped to 94%. Done effectively, dissent challenges groupthink, reminds those in the majority that there are alternative perspectives and possibilities, and prompts everyone to think more creatively about solutions.

So how do principled, often marginalized rebels like MLK ensure their ideas are heard and elaborated upon? What's the best way to contest ill-conceived views held by authority figures? In your professional life, how do you overcome resistance and defensiveness and win colleagues to your side?

Six decades of scientific research offers insight into exactly what someone lacking power and status can do to gain a receptive audience.

Demonstrate how your work has benefitted the team.

Perhaps you have indispensable skills, specialized knowledge, or vast experience that allowed you to play a "glue role" in an organization. You answer questions, help people, and amplify the contributions of others.

You might also point to mentorship, service, sacrifices, and overdrive mode in the presence of time, financial, and personnel constraints. This will remind people that you accumulated a large number of "idiosyncrasy credits" – that is license to cash in the goodwill you've earned and challenge the majority opinion.

Pass the group threat test.

Illustrate that you have the best interests of the group at heart. Show that your primary concern is boosting the team's chances of success and longevity. Acknowledge potential upfront costs or short-term pain points, but explain that you're focused on a better long-term future. If you stand to benefit from the direction suggested, address that conflict of interest. You want to inspire trust and evoke curiosity, not fear.

Pass these first two tests and you gain an audience who will scrutinize the message. It's no longer about you, the messenger. This is a huge accomplishment. Now you must deliver a high-quality, persuasive message. There are several ways to maximize your chance of success.

Be creative with your consistency.

Stay on point, no matter who you talk to or what skepticism emerges. Across 97 studies on persuasive appeals, the strongest predictor of success was consistent messaging.

But recognize that mindless repetition doesn't often work. What triggers and holds curiosity is expressing the same message in different ways. Use anecdotes and stories as well as data. Include precise details on the benefits of ideas. Help people imagine what they will be doing, thinking, and feeling six months and one year in the future. Make the relevance of your message clear to each person and tie it to what is deeply interesting and valuable to them. While you won't know which arguments will be attractive to whom, you can have a master list from which to choose.

Lean on objective information.

Label what is subjective opinion and what has supported evidence. You earn an audience's trust by anticipating their questions and already having answers ready. Show how your own view has updated over time in response to new high-quality information.

Address obstacles and risks.

It might feel intuitive to focus only the positives and what an audience will gain. But it's important to be upfront about the difficulty of executing on your idea and the dangers that might arise as you pursue it. Transparency boosts persuasive appeal.

Encourage collaboration.

Reduce the distance between you and your audience. Use "we" instead of "I." Investigate and embrace the expertise of your teammates and explicitly ask for their assistance to improve on your idea. Show you know their background, and ask them

to leverage this knowledge, strength, and skill. Offer opportunities for them to volunteer criticism and refinements.

Try also to meet with potential detractors in private (instead of public forums) so you can effectively address their concerns. Let them know how they've been helpful and give them credit as contributors to solutions.

Enter every conversation with an open mindset. What you possess is a work in progress, and the audience will offer guidance in designing the next, better iteration.

Get support.

Demanding activities, like dissent, are less daunting when bolstered by friends. Over the past few decades, scientists have discovered that the mere thought of existing healthy relationships allows us to believe that more is possible and act with bravery. When we know allies are just a phone call away, we view their capabilities as part of our own supply and can act with more confidence and resilience.

Results are not guaranteed, but these seven rules ensure a greater probability of winning over an audience and turning dissenting ideas into accomplishments. What the world needs now are not conventional thinkers but people who dare to differ, deviate, and defy to make their organizations – and society – a better place.

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