

It's a team

Five steps to shift your perception as a 'know it all' to a valued negotiating colleague

Question:

I think well on my feet and am able to solve problems quicker than most people. Decisions at our company are team-based. At a meeting last week, I received strong feedback from the group telling me that I am egocentric and that I tell people what to do rather than working collaboratively. I need to renegotiate my approach, any suggestions?

Answer:

It's not easy having a gift of framing an issue quickly and creating solutions that work, when the structure you work in insists the process is as important as the solution. I suspect the time you invest having to listen to and work through different options to gain consensus feels like a waste of time, especially when the team comes up with the same solution you had hours earlier.

At the same time, how you position your ideas determines your success with this team and, potentially, promotional opportunities. Negotiating effectiveness is determined by your ability to influence the other party. Therefore, it's time to focus on being more persuasive.

Following are five steps to help you shift your negative perception as a "know it all" to a colleague who possesses great intellect and is also a strategic problem-solver:

1) Ask questions. Shift your focus from being a problem-solver to being a facilitator of the solution process. Begin each meeting by asking questions, even if you know the answers. Use your body language to show you are actively listening. Lean forward. Look the person in his/her eyes. Nod your head and/or smile when appropriate. You want the other person to feel that what he/she has to say is important.

2) Take notes. When you capture ideas, words or phrases on paper, the other person feels that what they are saying is important.

Keep yourself engaged in the conversation by confirming key points or asking for clarification. People often think out loud. Just because they said something doesn't mean it's what they intended to say.

Remember, people don't always say what they mean or mean what they say. So verify. Ask the person to confirm your understanding of what he/she said. It's not unusual for people to say, "No, that's not what I meant. What I was trying to say was It's a great check-and-balances system for processing the information correctly."

3) Let them tell their stories. This takes patience and emotional discipline. But it shifts the relationship from an intellectual to an emotional level. People make decisions on more than just facts. They use intuition, feelings, risk tolerance, ego, past experiences and perceived consequences. Persuasion is complicated.

Listen carefully and do not interrupt, unless it's to the whole group's benefit. There are always those people who go on, and on, and on and on. It's OK to ask, "The key point you want to make here Larry is ...?" and let Larry fill in the blanks.

4) Measure your words. How you say something is equally as important as what you say. Choose your words carefully. Give credit to those team members who made points about certain parts of your idea so they feel they contributed to the solution.

When you have a different idea than another team member, don't put them down. Take a collaborative approach such as, "I can see your point and was wondering have you considered ...?" rather than discrediting the other party's position by saying, "I see your position, but ...?"

5) Never argue. Putting the spotlight on a team member who made a mistake, incorrectly assessed something or is misinformed is a self-defeating proposition. Humiliation has deep roots and a long memory. For some people, revenge is just around the corner. If you cause someone to experience humiliation, you can bet hard feelings will prevail.

An effective method for redirecting the focus from the ill-informed person to the task at-hand is to ask a question. To illustrate, let's say your group wanted to hire an engineer whose salary requirements are higher than the running average for previously hired engineers. However, this can-

didate worked for NASA and brings knowledge and experience beyond previously hired engineers. Howie, a team member, blurts out in a rather defensive voice, "We can't hire him. His salary requirements are beyond the acceptable range."

One approach is to present all the reasons why this candidate is so valuable, which places Howie's ego on the firing line. No matter how much he may want to change his mind, he's really forced to maintain his original position. His ego can't risk conceding.

A second, more effective approach is to ask a question that creates doubt and causes the team to examine new evidence.

Using that approach you might say, "You know Howie, you are right. I don't think we have ever extended an offer to anyone in engineering beyond the grade level. And do we know if the company has ever made an offer to an employee outside of their grade level?" You win by validating Howie's position and simultaneously creating doubt. The team now has a new focus to investigate. Ego's saved.

While this approach takes patience, asking the "right" questions will help you direct the team's focus without coming across as a "know it all."

Your innate talent for thinking quickly on your feet is a strategic advantage, especially in these situations because you will always be at least one-step ahead of the group. Just be sure not to come across as an interrogator. People's emotions change when they think they are being drilled.

Over time, as you master the skill of asking questions, your team members will shift their perceptions of you as an overbearing team member to that of a strategic leader who inspires others.



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