"Your baby’s ugly!"

Marshall, a television executive, was facing open rebellion from the writers he supervised. Marshall had been supervising television a long time and was completely comfortable stopping conversations with a forceful “No!” The writers viewed Marshall as harsh and uncaring.

When I asked what he thought the writers were upset about, his first response was that they were overly sensitive. “Everything they write is precious to them. Every scene, every word, is like their baby. I’m the guy who has to tell them their baby’s ugly. Nobody likes what I have to say.”

“Even if they don’t like your message,” I ventured, “is there a way you could deliver it that wouldn’t strain the relationship so much?”

“Ha! Fat chance!” he laughed.

I told Marshall I felt differently. I told him I felt it was possible to get your message heard AND attend to the relationship. My friend and colleague Lois Frankel quotes Churchill all the time, saying, “Tact is the ability to tell someone to go to hell in such a way they look forward to the trip. Diplomacy is the art of telling
people to go to hell in such a way that they ask for directions!"

He laughed again. “If you can show me how, I’ll do it!”

Over the six months of our coaching, Marshall explored different behaviors, looking for ones that would allow him to say no while building up, not dragging down, his relationships. We ended up naming the topic of our conversations: “Disagree Agreeably.”

“I think differently about that.”

One of our earliest conversations happened to be about competition. Marshall loved competition. He told me he was constantly calculating whether he was winning or losing. His ability to focus on what would give him a leg up had gotten him quite a bit of success. But now, he agreed, that natural strength was becoming a liability.

When we shifted back to discussing “Disagree Agreeably,” I suggested that competition might be showing up when he disagreed with people.

Marshall was intrigued.

I observed that Marshall’s current mode for disagreement felt like win/lose, right/wrong, black/white, all-or-nothing. The very framework of the conversation was competitive.

I told him I had an image in my head of what it might be like if I disagreed with Marshall. I said I pictured myself on the ground while he, like an armored knight, stood triumphant over me, a foot on my chest. Disagreement with Marshall, I said, meant only one idea could remain standing: his.

Marshall didn’t argue. In fact, he was curious if competition was baked into his style of disagreement.

Between two of our early sessions, Marshall observed himself when other people suggested ideas to him. He was rather shocked to find just how competitive his default setting actually was. He could feel himself diminishing other’s ideas with labels like “wrong” or “stupid” or “worthless.” He felt the image of the triumphant knight was disturbingly accurate. “No wonder I’m pissing people off!” he said.
Marshall wanted homework in the form of scripts.

"Look," he said, "if I'm going to suddenly stop my vanquishing knight routine, slaying ideas all around me, I'm going to need some alternate words to use – something to at least get me started."

Because Marshall was as ferocious about his learning as he was about everything else, he tried lots of different scripts. Two particularly helped him Disagree Agreeably.

The first script was all about co-existence. It only has two lines:

1. “Hmmmm, that's interesting.”

and

2. “I think differently about that.”

I told Marshall the words of the script were not sacred; they could change with the situation. But the ideas embedded in the two lines were sacred. The ideas were what made the script effective.

The first line (“Hmmmm, that's interesting”) is about giving recognition.

Giving recognition says to the other person, “Your idea has merit – whether I agree with it or not.” It allows the other person’s idea to exist. There’s no vanquishing knight in this script.

Recognition is not acquiescence or manipulation. Recognition simply puts the focus on the other person’s idea before shifting the focus to your own.

Recognition need not be long. I sometimes do it with a simple, “Huh!” But recognition must be genuine. You must actually consider the other person’s idea.

The second line (“I think differently about that”) tees up your idea and, again, affirms the co-existence of the other person’s idea.

“I think differently about that” is the opening line of your counter-argument. But because there is no win/lose
or right/wrong framework, the phrase has no fight in it. There is no sense of attack. Co-existence allows defenses to come down.

An added bonus:

A phrase like "I think differently about that" gives you permission to start wherever you please. You don’t need to link your idea to the other person’s idea. Your idea can stand alone. Frame your idea however you want because, well, because you think differently about it!

Marshall found this script infinitely flexible and amazingly effective.

**Feel. Felt. Found.**

When I began explaining the second script to Marshall, I told him to imagine it had a big warning stamped on the cover.

I explained the warning this way:

This second script can sound formulaic. As humans, we are averse to being spoken to in formulas. So beware: what comes out of your mouth needs to sound authentic. If you sound like you’re following a script, the relationship you’re trying to promote can suffer.

My warning made Marshall lean in with interest.

This script is called “Feel. Felt. Found."

The script has three lines: one line for each word. Here’s the meaning embedded in each line:

“**Feel.**” The key sentence for “Feel” is ‘I understand how you feel.’ The point here is to align with the other person. It says to the other person, “I’m with you. I get it. I understand.” It’s a form of recognition, as “Hmmmm, that’s interesting” is in the first script.

“**Felt.**” The key sentence for “Felt” is ‘I might have felt that way, too.’ The point here is to normalize the other
person’s idea. You’re saying that you find the other person’s idea reasonable and worthy of respect. It’s a form of validation.

“Found.” The key sentence for “Found” is ‘A lot of people in your position have found…’ I’m not crazy for this form of ‘social pressure’ persuasion for two reasons. First, it’s often inaccurate. Second, I think leaders should speak for themselves rather than for “others in your position.”

So I reframe “Found” as my opportunity to express my point in a reasonable way. I think of it as “I have found that…” That’s the idea. I rarely use those words.

Here’s the progression of ideas:

- **I see your point** (“I understand how you feel”)
- **Your point makes a lot sense** (“I might have felt that way too”)
- **Here’s my idea about that** (“I’ve have found that…”)

Marshall initially felt this second script was too rigid. Then, one day, with one of his writers, he actually said the words, “I know how you feel.” Upon hearing himself say that, he found it easy to add the second “makes a lot of sense” part. Then he gave his idea.

“Feel, Felt, Found” had come out of Marshall’s mouth naturally and it helped the conversation. During the next few months, “Feel, Felt, Found” made a positive difference for him several times.

Both scripts gave Marshall a way to attend to the relationship while making points that felt important to him. As he used the scripts more and more, he found his right/wrong thinking loosening up. Allowing another person’s idea to co-exist with his own gave him his biggest boost towards *The Look & Sound of Leadership.*
Core Concepts:

- Listen for phrases like “You’re wrong” or “That’s not right.” They may indicate a competitive style of disagreeing.

- Shift your thinking to co-existence. You don’t need to vaporize the other person’s idea in order to get yours heard.

- Recognition that the other person’s idea has intrinsic value doesn’t mean you agree with it.

- Avoid comparing your idea with the other person’s. Comparing leads to competition. Rather, state your idea as separate and independent.

- Be flexible with the words above. Learn the ideas in the scripts, not the lines.

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