Disagree better—*Tammy Lenski*

The way we handle disagreement has a ripple effect on our work, relationships, and influence. What kind of ripples do you want to set in motion?

Few things feel quite as depleting as stubborn conflict.

Decisions and initiatives stall. Meetings revisit the same ground without progress. Energy that should go into the work gets diverted into managing tension instead. Trust erodes and relationships become strained. We second-guess ourselves, replay exchanges, and brace for the next interaction.

As time passes, issues that could have been addressed differently become ongoing friction that drains time, attention, and momentum.

It has a way of ruining your day. And you know it'll be back tomorrow.

As a mediator, coach, and conflict resolution professor, I spent the last three decades close to conflict that's messy, stuck, alienating, or expensive in ways people don't always see right away.

It rarely gets this way because people are inept, deliberately unreasonable, or "difficult." Most people are capable and doing the best they can with a limited set of defaults for handling disagreement. The patterns and habits that turn disagreement into damage run deep in our organizations, our families, our own reflexes.

Why disagreement gets difficult

Conflict gets difficult for many reasons, but **there's a thread that runs through a surprising number of situations that ruin our day: We disagree badly.**

Sometimes the difficulty comes from discomfort with voicing dissent. Disagreement feels risky, so we sidestep it, smooth things over, or grit our teeth and hope it passes. Those kinds of responses leave underlying issues unaddressed and likely to resurface later. And when we don't speak up, we deny others the value of our perspective.

Other times, the difficulty is in the way we express our disagreement or respond to opposing viewpoints. It can be hard to balance candor and diplomacy. When that balance is off, conversations veer away from the issue itself. Attention shifts to how something was said, and people react to posture, tone, and word choice. Over time, this strains relationships and sidelines people.

It's no surprise that when we approach disagreement as a liability, it becomes just that. We treat it like a problem and we put our energy into fixing it. We treat it like an obstacle to agreement and we focus on how to sidestep or subdue it.

When we treat disagreement as a liability, our responses and reactions tend to feed nagging conflict. We create the very thing we're trying so hard to prevent.

The poet Robert Frost was onto something:

The best way out is always through.

Reframing disagreement

The answer isn't to try to agree more or disagree less. It's to stop treating disagreement as a liability and start treating it as an asset. It's to disagree better.

We already know that friction can be fuel for insight and that debate can sharpen judgment and clarify options. **This means that disagreement can be an asset if we know how to let it be one.**

When we operate as though disagreement has value, it changes the way we approach it. We see that colliding viewpoints not as danger signs but as the seeds of clearer thinking, wiser decisions, and deeper trust. The "messy middle" of conflict begins to look less like a quagmire and more like a goldmine of information, ideas, and insights.

Disagreement begins to take a different shape.

Building the dexterity to disagree better

Skilled disagreement has two main components: Building tolerance for disagreement and developing the language, habits, and approaches for responding effectively.

I find that first building capacity with the second component often leads to better success and contributes to progress with the first one. Typical places to begin include:



Deciphering conflict to gain new insight into what's happening and why.



Refining the habits and approaches for skilled disagreement.



Centering so good skills are available when they're needed most.

The takeaways:

- Disagreement itself isn't the problem.
- The way we relate to disagreement determines whether it becomes an asset or a liability.
- Discomfort + lack of skilled disagreement is a costly combination.
- There are learnable ways to engage disagreement that reduce the negative consequences and amplify the benefits.

Thanks for considering my way of thinking about conflict, disagreement, and friction.