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That ‘Something’ We Don’t Want to Hear

“**E**very time we have a discussion, there’s complete alignment—100 percent buy-in.” It sounded too good to be true—and, as it turned out, it was.

I can distinctly remember the interview we conducted with an executive several years ago. When we asked about his process for getting buy-in from others, he couldn’t wait to give an example. “During a meeting with my team, we had a particularly important decision to make. So, I went around to everybody and asked for a thumbs-up or a thumbs-down on my idea. Before they voted, I told them that, for me, this was definitely a thumbs-up.”

“And how did that work for you?” we asked.

“Amazing—it was unanimous!” the executive said. “It was just incredible to see ten people, completely aligned.”

Needless to say, this isn’t really alignment.

And that brings up a question we’ve all heard and asked: “I’ve got good news and bad news. Which do you want to hear first?”

Most people prefer the bad news first, and research bears this out. It’s not that people revel in bad news; they simply want to reduce the uncertainty so they can relax.

There’s also a psychological phenomenon at work: the peak-end effect. Simply put, we tend to judge an experience two ways: by the peak moments and by how things end. So, when the bad news is shared first, that

allows the good news at the end to leave a positive impression.

The challenge, though, is that the bearer of that bad news often wants to put off the discomfort for as long as possible. It’s like that team discussion where nobody wants to be the one who disagrees.

In some meetings these days, I’ll simply start with a question: “Tell me something you think I don’t want to hear.”

What usually follows is a pause, then a very curious look and then something like “I didn’t expect that.”

Admittedly, what matters most is not what we are against, but what we are for. That’s the desired outcome. However, it’s never the starting point.

At a time when everybody seems to be opposed to something—with differences overshadowing commonalities—engaging with others is not always butterflies and rainbows.



But real issues only get raised when disagreements are aired.

Too often, though, leaders want the agreement and shun the argument. We’ve all seen those meetings where everyone automatically concurs—no discussion necessary. Candidly, that’s dysfunctional.

Pleasantly agreeing with everyone serves no one. Appeasement is not the same as alignment. What’s needed is a healthy dose of constructive conflict to bring out collective genius.

This isn’t the equivalent of posting an anonymous two-star Yelp review on last night’s meal and never looking back. It’s both expressing a viewpoint and helping find a solution.

Only when we assess what’s wrong can we construct what’s right.

And that’s not easy. Whether a roomful or a Zoomful, half the people will have one per-

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spective and half will have another.

Leadership means creating an atmosphere that elicits candor, with no fear of retribution—fostering transparency and authenticity, mirroring the behaviors we want to see in others.

Because leadership is listening for the silent voices. It’s making the uncomfortable truths comfortable. And always seeking that something we don’t want to hear. ■

For more career advice, read Gary Burnison’s latest book, **I Need a Job!**