Constructive dissent

Making an asset of our differences and disagreements

Prepared by Bob Dick and Chris Patty
We (Chris Patty and Bob Dick) are interested in practical ways of responding to difference, dissent and disagreement.

Is that of interest to you? If so, this brief document is to help you to explore this topic. It’s a varied collection. There are thought-starters, theoretical perspectives, anecdotes and thought experiments. There are occasional provocations to invite you to think more deeply and constructively about difference and disagreement.

We think you’ll get the most out of this document if you take your time — if you reflect on each entry before proceeding to the next. For each item you might do something like this: read ... reflect on the meaning ... notice your reaction ... reflect on your reaction ...

You may occasionally disagree with some of what we write below. You may even wonder how on earth we could hold such ridiculous beliefs. If so, we invite you to treat that as a wonderful opportunity. After all, the purpose of this document is to explore disagreement and its constructive uses.

When that is your reaction, we have three suggestions for how you might deal with the disagreement.

- First, assume that we are well-intentioned. (We assure you that we are.)
- Second, try to find parallels with your own experience. When you find one, imagine it as vividly as you can. Read the entry with that experience in mind.
- Third, proceed to the first entry below, on curiosity. Read it. Reflect on it. Decide what insight you can draw from it. Remember and make use of that insight as you continue to read.

If you like to take notes in the documents you read, we’ve provided space for that.
Curiosity

Imagine that you have come across some expressed belief that stirs your immediate and strong disagreement. How might you respond constructively?

Our suggestion is that you **arouse your curiosity** ... that you take a moment to **wonder** how you and the other person could hold such different views.

In our experience, being curious — genuinely curious — is one of the most constructive ways of dealing well with dissent.

Or imagine when two (or more) people disagree. They can engage, with genuine curiosity about each other’s position and reasoning. When they do, the dynamics of the interaction suddenly become more constructive.

When we become curious about the sources of a disagreement we ask more constructive questions. Then, when we present our own views, we do so in less antagonistic and more constructive ways.

To respond constructively to dissent, we find that curiosity is our friend. We think that you may find that’s true for you too.

How do you know that it’s time to activate your curiosity? ...

**Surprise** is a signal that tells you that some new and unexpected information has just come to you

**Curiosity** is what allows you to open yourself to it, to benefit from it.
A thought experiment in curiosity

Think of someone in the recent past who has expressed something to you in conversation — something that stimulated an initial strong disagreement in you.

Imagine you were able to muster some curiosity towards their statement.

Here’s some words to describe possible responses with different qualities of curiosity.

- mild interest
- warm encouragement
- cool interest
- expansive appreciation
- encouraging exploration
- sensitive affirmation
- grudging acknowledgement
- effusive recognition
- tentative acknowledgement
- excited inquisitiveness

Choose a word combination or create your own. Indicate where you might locate this potential new response of yours on the following continuum ...

... somewhere between complete rejection and complete acceptance of their statement.
“Sorry, I’m brain damaged”

That’s Bill Leak. And that’s his response when people accuse him of being insensitive and tasteless. He assures us they do so, frequently.

Bill Leak is a political cartoonist for the *Australian* newspaper. If you read the *Australian* you probably know of his work.

If so, do you have any opinions about Bill Leak and his cartoons?

Did you know that he was brain damaged? He fell from a balcony. As a consequence he suffered a serious brain injury.

Does knowing about it make a difference to your opinion of him and his work?
Kris was a colleague. He frequently offered his opinions belligerently. It seemed to us that he intended what he said as a deliberate challenge — an invitation to take a different stance. There was a temptation to respond in similar fashion.

Then a thought occurred. He was from a different culture ... a different nation, a different religion. His upbringing and experience were very different.

Suppose we had been born into the family he was born into.

Suppose we had been brought up as he was, in his family, his nation, his culture. Suppose we had experienced all that he had experienced.

Might we then believe what he believed? Might we then offer our opinions in the same way that he offered his opinions?

From his very different perspective, we wonder how Kris experienced us. How might he have interpreted what we said and how we said it?

How was he tempted to respond?

There are people who differ from us much more than Kris does. Suppose we had been brought up in their culture, as they were. What then?
“Don’t confuse me with the facts”

This is Elliot Aronson. He is a social psychologist and author with an interest in how people interact.

Here’s a sentence from his book on social psychology.

“As long as I know why I believe x, I am relatively free to change my mind; but if all I know is that x is true — and that's all there is to it — I am far more likely to cling to that belief, even in the face of disconfirming evidence.”

— *The social animal*, Freeman, 1976, pp 299-300.

Disconfirming evidence may be important. But suppose Elliot Aronson is right? Perhaps, by itself, disconfirming evidence may not be enough.

How well does this accord with your experience of others?

Of yourself?

And ... so what?
It’s other people who have unreasonable beliefs

Let’s turn Elliot Aronson’s offering on its head ...

What if it’s the other person who appears to have made up their mind? If Aronson is right, then presenting evidence may not be helpful.

What other options can you think of?

How about the following? For each, think of a specific example of someone who often disagrees with you. Would any of these, alone or in combination, help?

(There’s space at the right for your notes, if you wish.)

- **Build relationships**  People may be more tolerant of the ideas of their friends. This is more likely if the friendship came first, and the disagreement came later.

- **Offer responsibility**  Give people responsibility for finding a solution to a problem. They may then be more likely to find their own way around beliefs that obstruct a solution.

- **Offer a trial**  Ask people to help devise a fair evaluation of the trial. Guarantee that a genuine negative evaluation will kill the idea. People are then more likely to agree to the trial.

- **Focus on outcomes**  Side-step the beliefs. Negotiate outcomes that you both can accept. Together, devise ways of achieving those outcomes.
Discover the reasons. Encourage people to explore the reasons for and against their beliefs. Give them time and space to do so. They may then sometimes decide that the beliefs are no longer reasonable. Or (more likely) they may still think that their beliefs are true — but perhaps the present situation is an exception.

Honour the past. Allow the past to be buried with honour. Sometimes, people resist change because it implies denigration of a valued past.

Allow time. Give people time to become accustomed to an idea. An idea sounds outrageous today? Perhaps in a month or two it will appear much less threatening or absurd.

Change behaviour directly. Ignore the beliefs. Instead, change the system to make old behaviours difficult or painful and new behaviours rewarding. Behaviour actually drives belief more than belief drives behaviour.

Combinations of these are usually more effective than any one used in isolation.

We offer a caution ... Using them dishonestly or manipulatively may be unhelpful. In fact it may undermine them and the relationship.
Defence mechanisms and other biases

Evolution has equipped us with many inbuilt habits and ways of dealing with what happens. Some of these interfere in unfortunate ways with our decision-making. Here are three, in particular, that can trigger disagreement or make agreement hard to reach.

For each, we offer a strategy that you could use, if you wished, to build greater self-awareness and greater tolerance for yourself.

- **Projection** — noticing in others what we most wish to avoid recognising in ourselves. Being sensitive to, and annoyed by, the traits we exhibit but deny — to others and to ourselves.

  Being critical of others may be a sign that we fear that the same is true of us.

  **When you notice yourself being critical of another, you could ask yourself:** "How true is that of me?"

- **Rationalisation** — devising plausible (but false) excuses to explain and justify our behaviour, without being aware that we do it.

  Often having a justification allows us to excuse, in ourselves, behaviour we would not be likely to excuse in someone else.

  "Suppose I didn’t have that justification. How, then, would I feel about my behaviour?"

- **Confirmation bias**  We notice, and pay attention to, evidence that supports our beliefs and decisions. We ignore, or find it hard to remember, evidence that challenges our beliefs and decisions.

  Often, we arrive at a decision or judgment first, because it “feels right”. Then, we seek out information that supports the decision. We avoid or dismiss information that challenges the decision.

  "What evidence does not support the decision that I’ve made? Taking all of the evidence into account, which decision might someone independent reach?"
On creativity and maintaining biases

People may seem uncreative, especially when it comes to considering others. Yet we can be extremely ingenious at rationalising the things we say and do.

You can see this in people who obey post-hypnotic suggestions to do something strange. Asked why, they manage to explain the behaviour ordered by the hypnotist as being of their own volition.

We also seem to maintain prejudices quite effortlessly. Consider the following conversation (as quoted by Robert Zajonc, Public Opinion Quarterly, 1960)

Mr X: The trouble with Jews is that they only take care of their own group.

Mr. Y: But the record of the community chest shows that they give more generously than non-Jews

Mr. X: That shows they are always trying to buy favour and intrude in Christian affairs. They think of nothing but money; that’s why there are so many Jewish bankers.

Mr. Y: But a recent study shows that the per cent of Jews in banking is proportionally much smaller than the per cent of non-Jews.

Mr. X: That’s it. They don’t go for respectable businesses. They would rather run nightclubs.

Of course we wouldn’t do that, would we? Would we?
Being sceptical about scepticism?

Reflect on the following three forms of scepticism. In your experience, which of them is most common?

a You tend to be sceptical about others’ ideas. For the most part you hold your own ideas firmly

b You try to be modestly sceptical about all ideas, including your own — willing to change your mind

c You’re mostly moderately sceptical about your own ideas, holding them lightly. You try to be open to new ideas from others.

Which of these three perspectives would be most comfortable for you?
Which of them best describes your most usual attitude to ideas?

Reflect on each of these options in turn. For each, what advantages and disadvantages do you think this option might entail —

■ for you?
■ for your decision-making?
■ for your relationships?
Words and things

If someone asked us (Chris and Bob) what our native language was we would say “English”.

But actually, each of us speaks a slightly different dialect — an “idiolect”, linguists call it. Chris speaks “Chris”. Bob speaks “Bob”.

The field of General Semantics has as a principle that the word is not the thing it represents. For example you can’t use the word “pen” to write or draw something.

This raises some interesting and relevant possibilities ...

■ Sometimes, therefore, we seem to disagree. But our disagreement may be illusory. Although we are using different words we may actually be describing the same reality.

■ When we seem to agree, our agreement may be illusory. We may be using the same words. But we may be using those words in different ways, referring to different concepts.

Sometimes it helps to be clear — to ourselves and others — about what we mean by the words we use.

Sometimes we have to see beyond the words, for instance by negotiating the meaning of our words. We may then find it easier to have a sensible conversation.
Most of us would like to think we’re aware of ourselves … aware of our thinking, our feelings and our body responses. ‘Nosce te ipsum’, or know thyself, has been a theme for writers, researchers and thinkers throughout history.

Becoming ‘aware’ and ‘knowing oneself’ can be somewhat problematic. As Benjamin Franklin, in his Poor Richard’s Almanack, observed in 1750: “There are three Things extremely hard, Steel, a Diamond, and to know one’s self”.

So how aware are we actually? Here’s some questions to ponder around self awareness and self knowledge and it’s role in ‘constructive’ dissent.

- What happens inside and around us when we ‘think’ or ‘feel’?
- Are we aware of what our body is ‘doing’ as we ‘think’ or ‘feel’?
- Can we differentiate these terms and develop knowledge of ourselves that builds our understanding of how we respond in different situations?
- Does our self perception align with others? Does it matter that alignment occurs or not?
- Is self awareness the holy grail of personal understanding or is there value in acknowledging other’s perception of us? (commonly called feedback).
- What is the value in ‘knowing our limitations’?

For a slightly different approach to bodily awareness and the conduit of ‘body, thinking and feeling’ have a read through the Radix approach (see the following URL for some information:

Metaphors and models

General Semantics has a more colourful way of saying “the word is not the thing it represents” —

The map is not the territory.

In this form we think it makes a lot of sense to us. For instance we can’t drive our car on a map of your street.

As an example, think of the territory that is the suburb in which you live. There may be several maps of it. For example ...

- one map might show the streets while another might show the local features such as park, shops, or bus stops
- one might show the power, telephone and cable distribution
- another might show the topography — the hills and valleys and creeks, for instance
- and yet another might show the distribution of rainfall over the past week.

Each map is different. Each achieves clarity by ignoring almost everything except its central focus. It may be that each map is correct, if partial. Each serves a somewhat different purpose.

In many respects the different maps are complementary. You would learn more about your suburb from several of the maps than from only one.

When might that be true about theories and models and ideas too?
The self-fulfilling prophecy

In 1968, researchers Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson carried out some influential research in classrooms. Their intention was to check whether results from their laboratory studies would also be found in the field.

Rosenthal and Jacobson tested the children in Oak elementary school.

They then identified to the teachers a number of “late bloomers”, pupils who could be expected to improve in the following year.

A year later, in the early grades, the identified pupils had “bloomed”. They did better on the tests.

Here’s some important additional information about the study ...

The students were average. Rosenthal and Jacobson chose them at random.

So, what do you think happened?

If you were a teacher, do you think your behaviour towards the so-called “late bloomers” might have changed? Would this influence them?

The teachers expected these pupils to improve. The pupils improved.

Was it the expectations of teachers that made the difference? Might negative expectations sometimes produce negative outcomes? How might we ensure that we use self-fulfilling prophesies to produce good outcomes?
Do expectations produce outcomes?

An implication of the Rosenthal and Jacobson study (above) implies that sometimes expectations influence outcomes:

\[ \text{expectations} \rightarrow \text{outcomes} \]

Let’s take that further ...

Perhaps there is an intermediate step. Perhaps it was the way the teachers acted towards the “late blooming” children that made the difference.

\[ \text{expectations} \rightarrow \text{actions} \rightarrow \text{outcomes} \]

Consider this ... We form assumptions about other people. We often treat our assumptions as facts.

The other people don’t know what is in our mind. They observe our behaviour. On this evidence they may then develop assumptions about \textit{us}.

Can you think of times when this might have been happening in your relationships?

Chris Argyris had something to say about this. He warned us that we often make assumptions about other people’s motives. He further claimed that we seldom check those assumptions. In fact it’s difficult to check — there are taboos against telling other people what we think their motives are.
It’s all in the relationship

Think about your current and past relationships – with colleagues, intimate partners, co-workers.

Take a moment to list the qualities (tangible or otherwise) in those relationships which allowed and encouraged dissent or disagreement?

How did you go about creating those qualities (your role, their role, role of others)? What were your personal ‘markers’ that the qualities enabled ‘constructive’ dissent?
What happens when anxiety raises it’s head – when dissent provokes fear?

Anxiety is its own distorted reality.

It changes the way our minds process information. We experience the symptoms of fear when there may not be fear around. We think negatively. We over-think. We notice cues that match our psychological expectations.

This can lead to restrictive solutions between people — unconstructive solutions — when either one or both become anxious during an exchange.

What’s your reaction? …

Think back over items 13, 14, 15 and 16

- Are there relationships of yours that are less satisfying or less effective than you would wish?
- In some of these relationships, is it possible that you and they have untested assumptions about each other?
- Could a self-fulfilling prophecy be operating?
- If so, what could you do about it?
Blocking and accepting – the role of improvisation in constructive dissent

The improviser has to be like a man walking backwards. He sees where he has been, but he pays no attention to the future. His story can take him anywhere, but he must still “balance” it, give it shape, by remembering incidents that have been shelved and reincorporating them. Very often an audience will applaud when earlier material is brought back into the story. They may not be able to tell you why they applaud, but the reincorporation does give them pleasure.

Blocking is the term used when one of two improvisers who are trying to create a scene together, ‘stops’ or halts the flow of action between them, usually due to an ‘in the moment’ (read probably socially learned) fear or concern. The other person invariably experiences the ‘block’ as a form of aggression. Accepting is when each person acknowledges the other person’s offer and generates a larger area of exploration in the improvisation and isn’t restricted by a predetermined script or rational logic. Keith Johnstone, author of “Impro- Improvisation and the theatre” says “there are two kinds of people in the world – those who say YES and those who say NO, those who say YES lead far more interesting lives”.

Consider the following exchange from 2 improvisers practicing accepting (saying YES to the other’s offer):

A: Augh
B: Whatever is it man?
A: It’s my leg Doctor
B: This looks nasty. I shall have to amputate.
A: It’s the one you amputated last time.
B: You mean you’ve got a pain in your wooden leg?
A: Yes Doctor
B: You know what this means?
A: Not woodworm Doctor?
B: Yes. We’ll have to remove it before it spreads to the rest of you. (A’s chair collapses)
B: My God! It’s spreading to the furniture... etc

His suggestion of saying ‘YES’ to another person with whom you may be in conflict may have merit for more progressive solutions. Clearly there are limits to this as a strategy, but consider the role of improvisation (and saying yes) in situations where you’ve experienced yourself or the other person or people ‘blocking’.
Crafting agreement from disagreement

Before you read this item, we invite you to think back over all the items above. Have any of those items have provided useful insights? If so, we invite you to remember those insights are you read this item.

To oversimplify, we are going to claim that there are two common styles of interaction. We’ll call them adversarial, and consensual. Presumably, you observe or experience many interactions. Do you recognise these two styles:

**Adversarial** styles are sometimes summarised as win/lose. The people taking part assume that one point of view will be accepted as correct. They try to persuade others to their own point of view. They strive to have their opinion accepted as correct. Debates and arguments usually take this form.

**Consensual** styles can be described as win/win. The aim is to reach agreement without stirring dissent. Participants try to avoid “rocking the boat”. They may stay close to ideas that they know are already accepted.
You may have experienced some blogs like this. You mostly hear views that reinforce your own opinions.

How common are these in your experience? Do you use them? If so, when?

Our interest is in a third style of interaction. It’s less common. It encourages genuine disagreement and strives to craft agreement from the disagreement. It may also be described as win/win, though it’s a tougher form. There isn’t a common term to describe it. We call it **dialectical**. Participants learn from one another. They explore their disagreements with interest and curiosity — to develop a more profound agreement.

Perhaps you already use this style. Or, if not, perhaps you could do so. How might you do that?
Final reflection

Have you worked your way through all items? If so, below is the journey you have now been on.

Here’s a final activity to help you to make use of any insights. Read through the list ...

1 Curiosity
2 A thought experiment in curiosity
3 “Sorry, I’m brain damaged”
4 If I were a ...
5 “Don’t confuse me with the facts”
6 It’s other people who have unreasonable beliefs
7 Defence mechanisms and other biases
8 On creativity and maintaining biases
9 Being sceptical about scepticism?
10 Words and things
11 Beyond words — the body
12 Metaphors and models
13 The self-fulfilling prophecy
14 Do expectations produce outcomes?
15 It’s all in the relationship
16 What happens when anxiety raises its head ...?
17 Blocking and accepting — the role of improvisation
18 Crafting agreement from disagreement

... and place a check beside any item that triggered a new idea, or an insight that you can use for yourself. (If you wish, you can use the space at the right for notes to yourself.)

What was the insight?

When will you use it?

How will you use it?

How will you check that it worked?
An invitation

We hope this short primer on some of our thoughts on practical ways of responding to difference, dissent and disagreement has been of value to you.

As we mentioned at the beginning we’re interested in exploring disagreement and it’s constructive uses. You may have comments, or reflections and thoughts of your own.

If so, we’d love to hear from you.

We’ve been known to run experiential workshops on Constructive dissent. You can check the Interchange website for details of workshops: