Communicating through Disagreement

1. When individuals disagree with each other, often it is because their beliefs, emotions, desires, and intentions do not perfectly align with everyone else.

2. There are two biases that may be coupled together during many disagreements with others, which causes us to think we are right and the other person is wrong:
   a. Self-serving bias – where we tend to perceive ourselves in an overly favorable manner.
   b. Confirmation bias – where we tend to find confirming evidence for our beliefs.

3. Here are rules for engagement to help override the self-serving bias and the confirmation bias:
   a. Realize that everyone is subject to the bias that they are right and others are wrong.
      i. Ask: “What if I’m wrong and the other person is right?” The realization of this possibility opens the door just a little to find agreement.
      ii. Ask: “What’s the goal of this conversation? What am I trying to accomplish? What do I hope to get out of it?” Clarifying this helps figure out the importance of finding agreement, walking away, or even conceding the other person is right. Focus on the goal of trying to understand the other person’s position and continue to work toward mutual understanding.
   b. Frame the conversation as a win-win game. This helps the other person feel like a partner, someone who expects to get just as much out of the conversation. In fact, treat the conversation partner as just that, a partner, not an adversary.
   c. Change the purpose of the conversation from winning to understanding. Seek to understand: What do they want? What are they thinking? Where are they coming from?

4. The only way to know what someone is thinking is through communication. Here are some things to consider regarding gaining understanding.
   a. It is important to try to get the other person to state as clearly as they can, what they believe on the topic discussed.
   b. Instead of guessing or making assumptions, state what the other person believes to be true or what they are thinking and ask them to confirm to avoid any misunderstanding.
   c. Do not refute an argument that was not presented by another. Instead, restate their beliefs again and again, until an agreement can be reached as to their exact position.

5. Here are some tips to help build skills for good communication:
   a. Be respectful.
   b. Listen attentively.
   c. Find points of agreement and state them. This will help the other person see progress.
   d. Highlight when learning has occurred and state what has been learned out loud.
   e. Acknowledge different perspectives and indicate understanding why the conversation partner might hold that opinion or see things a different way.
   f. Keep emotions out of the exchange.
   g. Discuss, don’t attack. People put up their defenses if they feel attacked. There is no sure way to shut off conversation than to attack the person rather than address their ideas.
6. Consider the following to help with active listening:
   a. Practice active listening.
   b. Focus and really listen. Concentrate on what the other person is saying. Listen actively, attentively, carefully, and respectfully so that the person knows someone respects them and cares what they really think.
   c. Reflect back what the person is saying by mirroring it, or repeating it in your own words.
   d. Empathize with the person, and make them feel heard and understood.
   e. Aim to comprehend what the person is saying and communicate this to them.
   f. Retain what they said throughout the conversation, even when disagreeing with them.

7. Asking questions can be useful to learn more, as well as to get the other person to see things differently. Try these questions, and be mindful of tone when asking them:
   a. “What, exactly, is your position? Please clarify it for me because I want to understand.”
   b. “How did you arrive at that belief or position? Have you always held it, or is it new?”
   c. “What is the source for your belief? Is it a reliable source? Are you sure?”
   d. “What if this source for your belief or position turned out to be unreliable or even wrong? Would you change your mind?” Ask and answer this question inwardly as well.
   e. “What would it take to change your mind?” Clarifying precisely what it would take to get them to change their mind is vital to communicating through disagreement. Consider and answer this question internally as well.
   f. “Would you change your mind if you knew the source of your position is wrong?”
   g. “Would you change your mind if the facts changed?”
   h. “Please, can you tell me what precisely it would take to change your mind?” Be willing to reciprocate. That is, let the other person know your answer to this question, and that if the facts change, your perspective or opinion would change as well. Then both parties can find a way to resolve the disagreement.

8. Understand the power of yes. However, keep the following in mind:
   a. Avoid using “Yes, but….” Yes, but, signals the other person is about to provide a counterexample to rebut the speaker’s argument or statement.
   b. Use “Yes, and….” This idea comes from the Harvard Negotiation Project. They call it the “and stance.” By linking points in a conversation with the word “and” instead of “but,” the other person recognizes their conversation partner’s points without conceding any of their own. It also signals that collaboration and working with the conversation partner instead of against them. Finally, it recognizes that both people in the conversation may have valid points, even if it appears that the ideas are in disagreement.
   c. Try these other statements as well: “That’s a great idea, and….” as well as “Interesting, and….”
   d. Keep practicing the “and stance.”
9. During disagreements, strong emotions such as anger, resentment, and even hatred may arise. Here are some tips for dealing with anger:
   a. Monitor emotions. Consider these questions and answer them internally: Do I just disagree with this person? Or am I actually becoming angry with them?
   b. Focus on the argument. Do not assume their intention is to cause anger.
   c. Focus purely on the ideas being discussed instead of the person discussing them.
   d. Listen. Be silent. Let the other person talk. Try to calm down and listen to understand.
   e. Take a break.
   f. Consider an exit. To avoid getting angrier, continue the conversation on another day.

10. The other person may be the one getting angry instead. Consider these tips for handling anger:
   a. Look for signs of frustration, offense, or anger in the face and voice of the other person.
   b. Try to deescalate their anger by offering them time to calm down with a break.
   c. Acknowledge their feelings and ask if anything has been said or done to anger them.
   d. Reframe or rephrase the argument or statement that made them angry.
   e. Listen, listen, and then listen some more. Do not escalate by talking more.
   f. Find some points of agreement or something positive to say about them or their ideas.
   g. Avoid blame.
   h. Assume the best in the conversation partner, and tell them that.
   i. Apologize if needed.
   j. Exit, leave, and walk away if necessary.

11. If others want to simply vent their frustration or share their opinion, without argument, try this:
   a. Stop talking and start listening.
   b. Ask a lot of questions: “What’s on your mind? Tell me more about that. I can hear your frustration, how does the situation make you feel?”
   c. Do not argue, contradict, rebut, or challenge. Just listen and let them vent.
   d. Try restating what you think the other person is venting about in your own words.
   e. Acknowledge what the other person is thinking and feeling, even while disagreeing with them. Try saying, “I understand, or I can see why you think that or feel that way.”