

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

What to Do When a “Devil’s Advocate” Tries to Derail Your Project

by Joanne Cleaver

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Devil’s advocates tend to pop up just when a project is about to launch. The idea has been validated and vetted, and then the devil’s advocate threatens to derail the whole affair with a volley of last-minute questions that appear to undermine the core rationale. Champions of

the project are often blindsided, fumbling for a defense of what they thought was obvious.

I hear about devil's advocates all the time in my work leading research projects that help industries measure how well they advance women and how they can do better. Women's initiatives are lightning rods for people who take a provocative position not to learn more, but to be disruptive. They claim they are challenging "political correctness" or the fairness of giving any one group "special treatment." Copious data indicates that more women in leadership delivers better business results. Companies know they need to retain, develop and promote more women to better serve women customers, clients and investors. Yet, I've seen many women's initiatives derailed or weakened when a devil's advocate argues that addressing the specific needs of women staff is somehow unfair to everyone else.

While devil's advocates can be a force for good—by challenging assumptions and helping to sharpen thinking—it's important to know how to deal with them. How do you disarm a devil's advocate? The goal should be to address legitimate concerns while foiling spurious objections. Here are six tactics that work for me and my clients in our work to retain and develop women leaders:

Be ready with a powerhouse statistic that crystallizes the case. That's how Darin Goehner, a partner with Seattle accounting firm Moss Adams, responds when men ask, "Hey, when do we get *our* initiative?" His response: "Look at the numbers. When women are 51% of partners, that's when men get their initiative." Goehner's answer drills down to the heart of the matter: the disproportionate effect of the CPA profession's culture on partner-track women.

Show how the topic is really a business issue, best solved by applying the same skills that you use with customers or clients. Risa Lavine, chief of staff for New York-based accounting firm CohnReznick, is sometimes asked if investing in a women's initiative will deliver measurable results. She turns it around by saying, "This is a business problem. So let's tackle

it as a business problem,” applying analysis, research and recommendations. CohnReznick is methodical about tracking the retention and advancement of its women, just as with any other metric.

Tackle the status quo head-on. It’s tempting for longtime leaders to think that a culture that has worked for them will work just as well for others. They’ll say, “If it ain’t broke....” Counter this with forecasts that illustrate the consequences of letting the status quo continue uninterrupted. Show alternative scenarios that project the expected effects of the proposed program.

Challenge assumptions by redirecting attention to the real issue. Occasionally, a devil’s advocate will make a sweeping statement, such as, “Women don’t really want to make it to the top.” The answer: “We need to ask women what they want and find out what it will take to help them achieve their goals.”

Show how everyone wins. Some people assume that supplementary programs for women give them “an unfair advantage.” Providing extra resources to offset cultural barriers doesn’t take anything away from men. In fact, the whole organization gains when women become better at selling, managing, innovating, and leading. Counter with: “It’s about adding more ways for women to win, not subtracting ways for men to win.”

Focus on shared goals, not winning this argument. Some people just can’t help it. “Let me play devil’s advocate...” they’ll say. When someone opens with this frank admission, it’s reasonable to ask why they think that’s constructive. Try: “Let’s not. We all agree that we need to find new ways to develop female talent. Let’s build on that, instead of trying to dismantle what we’ve already accomplished.”

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Charles Shillingburg an hour ago

I have found that it is best not to respond in a way that sounds defensive or attacks the critic. Usually these individuals see themselves as the guardians of the company. Their role is to help their company spend their money wisely and to be effective. Outsiders selling products and services are viewed skeptically by them.

They often have valid points, so listening, acknowledging their concerns and not being defensive are the best practices. That said, one has to control the meeting and not let them take control or you will lose the initiative. If I can not directly address their concern in a positive manner, I acknowledge the concern(s) and tell them that "I will meet with them separately to further understand the issue." Acknowledging them and then addressing their issues can turn them into a strong ally and advocate within their organization. You allow them be the hero for pointing out the issues they did and you become a hero by addressing them. This allows them to strongly advocate for your product or service internally, as the best product or service, because it brings value to the company (their concern in the first place). Your perceived attacker can often

times become your strongest ally and sales advocate. In addition, they help you/your company improve your product, service and sales approach for future clients. You can also often use them as a referral with future customers.

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