

“Thank You, Because...”: Discussing Differences while Finding Common Ground

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Encountering diverging viewpoints is an unavoidable part of social and organizational life. Because no two people hold identical beliefs, knowledge, values, or goals, opposing views are bound to arise at some point when people pursue their personal and collective interests. A large literature has demonstrated that engaging with diverse viewpoints can create numerous benefits, including forming more accurate beliefs (Becker, Porter, & Centola, 2019; Lorenz, Rauhut, Schweitzer, & Helbing, 2011; Minson, Lieberman & Ross, 2011; Shi, Teplitskiy, Duede, & Evans, 2019), creating better team performance (Mannix & Neale, 2005; Woolley, Chabris, Pentland, Hashmi, & Malone, 2010), and creating more efficient markets (Levine et al., 2014).

However, people often struggle to handle contradicting viewpoints constructively. For instance, people often experience negative emotions such as anxiety and discomfort when encountering people from a different social group (Stephan, 2014) and make negative inferences about people who hold different preferences or beliefs (Kennedy & Pronin, 2008; Pacilli, Rocco, Pagliaro, & Russo, 2016; Ross & Ward, 1995). These psychological reactions often lead to either argumentation and escalated conflicts (McCroskey, & Wheelless, 1976) or disengagement and avoidance (Gerber, Huber, Doherty, & Dowling, 2012; Chen & Rohla, 2018), which can prevent people from reaping the benefits of diverse viewpoints and even threaten the prosperity of organizations and our society. How, then, can people create positive and high-quality engagements when different viewpoints arise?

Different Approaches to Discussing Opposing Viewpoints

When diverging viewpoints are revealed in a conversation, people need to decide—either implicitly or explicitly—how they will respond to the other person’s opposing views. One

common approach people frequently take is the “*No, Because...*” approach: to *find fault* in the other person’s reasoning by dissecting each statement and identifying their incoherent logic or misinformed facts to demonstrate why that position warrants rejection (Paglieri, 2009). While debating the correctness of a viewpoint can be productive and valuable in certain cases—such as discovering scientific truth—this approach rarely applies to disagreement in organizational life or civic society, where one problem might have multiple solutions, and different opinions and preferences are often a product of subjective interpretations rather than objective facts. However, people may easily fall victim to their “naïve realism” and overlook the subjective nature of their own construal of social actions and entities (Ross & Ward, 1995), finding it all too convenient and reasonable to poke holes in each other’s argument. This, in turn, can create frustrated communicators who feel misunderstood and underappreciated, and who therefore may either escalate the conflict or withdraw from the engagement entirely.

To help people overcome such impulsive reactions, recent teaching in active listening techniques has advocated for the practice of restating another person’s opinion to ensure *accurate understanding* before expressing one’s own argument—a modern exemplar of Dale Carnegie’s famous preach: “Seek first to understand, and then to be understood.” By repeating and rephrasing, this technique forces the responder to listen and process their conversation partner’s argument—at least on a shallow level—and demonstrate such processing to the other person. In the current research, we characterize this technique as the “*I Hear That...*” approach. While intuitive and promising, the efficacy of this technique has received little empirical support.

Finally, in search of a conversational technique that would facilitate open conversation and create an inclusive environment where people feel valued and appreciated, we have developed a novel conversation technique—the “*Thank You, Because...*” approach—with improv experts from a professional improvisational theater and school, The Second City in Chicago.

Inspired by the collaborative spirit in improvisational theater (Leonard & Yorton, 2015), this approach encourages people who have different perspectives to identify and acknowledge what they *value or appreciate about hearing another's point of view*. To this end, they may choose to start their response by saying “Thank you, because...” or an equivalent to mention aspects of the other person’s comments that they genuinely value, and then follow with their own argument. Based on recent findings suggesting that receiving affirmation and appreciation can promote more cooperative behaviors and elicit favorable impressions of the other person (Goldstein, Vezich, & Shapiro, 2014; Grant & Gino, 2010; Swann, Polzer, Seyle, & Ko, 2004), we expected that this approach would create various positive outcomes in conversations about different viewpoints.

Consequences of Talking About Disagreement with Different Approaches

To evaluate whether the “Thank You, Because...” approach can create better conversations than the “No, Because...” and the “I Hear That...” approaches, we consistently measured the following constructs after participants’ short conversations in two experiments:

First, given that people could engage in conflict-escalating competitive behavior or conflict-deescalating cooperative behavior when responding to conflict and disagreement (Kennedy & Pronin, 2008), we examined to what extent different approaches would influence the competitive/collaborative tone of a conversation. Next, we tested to what extent different approaches could influence the quality of listening, which we measured as both a sense of feeling heard and a sense of hearing the other. Given that in many cases, people need to work together to reconcile their disagreement, we further tested to what extent people perceived common ground in between after a short conversation. Considering that people tend to view those whose opinions differ from their own to be unreasonable and unable to see things fairly (Ehrlinger, Gilovich, & Ross, 2005), we measured to what extent people perceived the other person as reasonable.

Finally, we measured interpersonal closeness to understand how different approaches influenced interpersonal relationship.

Experiments

In Experiment 1, we compared the impact of the “Thank You, Because” approach to the “No, Because” approach in face-to-face conversations. Participants were recruited at either a public workshop or a campus-based laboratory ($N = 186$ in total). After being randomly paired with unacquainted participants at the same event, each participant rated a series of 20 statements on their preference for engaging in a variety of behaviors from “Never” (0) to “Always” (10) and compared their ratings to identify the item with the most diverging ratings. (Examples of statements in Experiment 1 included: “I get a seasonal flu shot.” “I like eating animal organs.”) Next, each dyad was randomly assigned to the “No, Because” or the “Thank You, Because” condition, received a detailed instruction on how to apply their respective approach in a conversation, and engaged in a three-minute conversation about their opposing views.

Our results showed that compared to the “No, Because” approach, where participants poked holes in one another’s arguments, participants using the “Thank You, Because” approach self-reported perceiving the conversations to be more collaborative, feeling more heard and valued, hearing the other better, and perceiving more common ground after the conversations. However, we identified no difference on the interpersonal closeness measures.

In Experiment 2, we aimed to replicate our findings in Experiment 1 with a different type of disagreement—on social norms and public policy. (Examples of statements in Experiment 2 included: “Everyone should get a seasonal flu shot.” “The U.S. showed lower its drinking age.”) Furthermore, we introduced a third condition, the “I Hear That” approach, in order to compare its impact against the “No, Because” and “Thank You, Because” approaches. We again recruited participants at a public workshop or a campus-based lab ($N = 290$ in total) and paired

unacquainted participants for three-minute conversations on the most diverging issue between them. Our results replicated the difference between the “Thank You, Because” and the “No, Because” conditions in Experiment 1. Moreover, we have found that although the “I Hear That” approach achieved similar results on several constructs compared to the “Thank You, Because” approach, the latter shows a unique advantage in eliciting the perception of common ground.

Conclusion

When disagreement arises, the language people use to communicate can make an important difference. Drawing from the wisdom of improvisational theater and behavioral science, our research features a novel technique—the “Thank You, Because...” approach—to help people conduct inclusive conversations about opposing viewpoints. Our experiments reveal that compared to a “No, Because” technique, which encouraged the common conversational instinct of poking holes in one another’s arguments, participants using the “Thank You, Because” technique engaged in more inclusive conversations, felt more heard and valued, and perceived more common ground. Furthermore, compared to a “I Hear That...” technique, where participants aimed to show their partner that they understood their viewpoint accurately, the “Thank You, Because” technique showed unique advantages in eliciting the perception of common ground. Taken together, our findings highlight the value of incorporating affirmation when discussing interpersonal differences, which has the promise to create better social engagement at work and in everyday life.