

## Righting a wrong

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### Righting a wrong

Recently, one of my friends – let's call him Alan – complained about a female colleague, who we'll call Martha. Alan described Martha as hardworking and intelligent, but said he hated her habit of interrupting him.

When asked how he normally dealt with this problem, Alan said that he tolerated it at first. When it happened repeatedly, however, he would lose his temper and yell at her to let him finish and not to interrupt him. Then Martha would get upset and shout there was no point in his finishing when she knew that what he was about to say wouldn't work.

What was going on?

Martha interrupted Alan because she thought what he was saying was wrong. How did Alan respond? He felt that her behaviour was unacceptable and told her to stop it. That's equivalent to saying: "You're wrong." Now, when two people accuse each other of being wrong, the chances are that the argument will turn into a fight.

The good news is that there's a simple way to avoid this dynamic and turn the conversation into a constructive dialogue in just three steps.

- **Step 1** Decide that you want to replace a potential conflict with a meaningful dialogue.
- **Step 2** Admit that, in any situation where two people interact, there's always the possibility that either person might be wrong – even when we're pretty sure that we're right. It's sufficient to admit the possibility.
- **Step 3** Express the possibility that "maybe I'm wrong" when the other person thinks you're wrong or when you believe that the other person is wrong.

Consider two potential cases.

First, let's imagine that someone accuses you of being wrong. Your boss says you haven't delivered your work on time. Now, you might think that this isn't true because you were supposed to deliver it today and you finished it yesterday evening.

What would you normally do? Of course, you'd defend your position. But if you look at the other party's point of view, you'd see that your boss obviously believes that you should have delivered earlier.

So, who's right?

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If you want to resolve this argument before it turns into a conflict (Step 1), you must start by admitting the possibility of you being wrong (Step 2) and say something like: "Maybe I didn't clearly understand the deadline for the delivery of my work. My understanding was to deliver today, but perhaps I misunderstood?" (Step 3).

This transforms the situation. The other person starts to consider the possibility that maybe the fault wasn't only yours after all. Typically, what follows is a meaningful and constructive discussion.

Now, look at a second possibility. You think someone else is wrong.

Let's assume you blame your spouse for not picking up the mail from the post office. You think you made yourself clear, but it didn't happen.

If you want to have a constructive dialogue (Step 1) then you must admit the possibility that you didn't make it clear enough (Step 2). Instead of asking something like: "Why didn't you pick up the mail?", you could say: "Hmm, it seems I didn't clearly let you know that I wanted you to pick up the mail today. Is that the case?" (Step 3)

By dealing with the situation this way, you give the other person the chance to respond truthfully and avoid a defensive response. Try it out, it really works.

My friend Alan tried it. Martha was quite stunned when she heard Alan saying: "Martha, it seems that I'm not good at expressing myself – hence, you believe that what I say isn't worthy of being completed. Any suggestions on how I could improve that?"

Martha never interrupted him again and he improved his communication by learning from her suggestions.



Charlie Lang is an Executive Coach and Trainer who founded Progress-U Limited in 2002. His mission is to achieve a positive change of the image of sales. He is a passionate and professional Executive Coach, Mentor Coach, Trainer, Public Speaker and Author of articles related to leadership, change management and innovative sales.

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