INNOVATION

Constructive Debate:
An Approach to Building Better Ideas

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Debate is usually combat, with winners and losers. Constructive debate puts the focus on building better ideas instead.

I have always thought of debate as a form of combat – intellectual combat, to be sure, but combat nevertheless, with winners and losers. In countless high schools and colleges, students try to demolish opponents' arguments and win the judges' approval. I was not a debater myself (though I can't imagine how I missed it; perhaps in "nice" Minnesota in that distant past, girls weren't invited to try out for the debating team). Still, I cheered on my grandson, an excellent debater, through several years of back and forth. So when a client asked me to devise a development program on the topic of "constructive debate," I was stumped. It seemed like a self-canceling concept. How could attempting to destroy someone's idea or point of view be constructive? But holding the two words together forced a connection. What if we put a focus on building better ideas? You can't do that without considering many different ideas…ideas that originate in different minds and are drawn from different experiences.

In my book, Building Better Ideas: How Constructive Debate Inspires Courage, Collaboration, and Breakthrough Solutions (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, November, 2019), I lay out an approach to debating ideas for the purpose of making them more rugged, more innovative, and more likely to succeed. In too many organizations, concerns about organizational power and politics lead to "groupthink" and the unfortunate phenomenon of moving mediocre ideas along with little critique, while potentially interesting and unusual ideas walk out the door still between the ears of meeting participants. Many of us have experienced the "meeting after the meeting" where people express their real opinions – thoughts that could have improved the original idea or allowed the group to pass on it and generate better ones.

Knowing how to express ideas clearly, how to engage others in providing feedback and upgrades, how to explore more deeply by building on others' thinking, and how to challenge ourselves and one another – all are important skillsets in the process of developing, improving, and implementing new ideas. The recent emphasis on design thinking requires that participants release their ownership of ideas until they are definitively chosen to move forward. Using these skills in a way that avoids defensiveness and encourages collaboration leads to co-creativity and team ownership of selected, refined, and improved ideas. In this way, better ideas can find their way to and through a decision process and end up as successful products, services, or processes.

When you are debating in a constructive way, you are, as the name suggests, building rather than tearing down. You are able to separate the generation of ideas from their evaluation – but when you evaluate, you are doing so honestly and with an eye to making the idea stronger, more resilient, and more innovative – or to replace it with one that is. Constructive debate is an ongoing learning process resulting in ideas your team can own and be proud of, because they are a product of the "hive mind" – people working fearlessly in community to share their knowledge and creativity.

I'll join that debate team!

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Founder of **The Influence Guru**, Kim Barnes is a coach, facilitator, and author with more than forty years of experience in leadership, influence, and organization development. She was a founder and, for many years, CEO of Barnes & Conti Associates, and developed or co-developed programs including *Exercising Influence*, *Inspirational Leadership*, *Intelligent Risk-Taking*, *Consulting on the Inside*, and *Managing Innovation*. She is the author of six books, including *Exercising Influence* (Wiley) and *Building Better Ideas* (Berrett-Koehler). She works with enterprise companies, government agencies, small businesses, and individuals from the San Francisco Bay Area.

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