

Turning Disputes Into Decisions

- by Devyani Borade

“It’s a bug!”

“No! It’s a feature!”

“C’mon, you’ve got to be kidding! How can it be a feature? It’s just wrong!”

“Rubbish! You just can’t understand it. It’s supposed to work that way!”

And so saying, my developer colleague walks off in a huff shaking his head at my supreme ‘thickness’. I, on my part, throw my hands up in exasperation and mentally shudder at the utter lack of usability that has been built into the product.

That was me, half a decade ago. I was only two years old in the industry and was still finding my feet. I had idealistic views and a very black-and-white concept of what was right and wrong. I did everything by the book and was easily appalled at what I considered was deliberate dodging of issues on the part of my colleagues. How could anyone act so narrow-mindedly? Wasn’t customer king?

In time, however, I learned my lessons. I started getting along well with my team mates and even began to enjoy the occasional debate with them. There were still heated discussions at work, but no longer was I upset and stressed out. No longer did I feel hard done by, unfairly treated or sorry for myself. So what had changed? Easy: my perception of ‘correctness’ and my ability to manage conflict.

As testers, we have the antagonistic job of pointing out deviations from expectations. Many a time, situations can get ugly and poison the work environment, affecting performance. Because of this, we need to be able to manage and resolve conflicts well, both those involving us, and those taking place amongst other team members, to ensure that the end product does not suffer and it is not our customer who bears the brunt of these differences of opinion. Now I have some thumb rules to ensure that I don’t get riled when things go wrong. I’d like to share these with you.

Empathise

Disagreeing outright and abruptly with someone, even if you think they are talking a load of rubbish, is not the smartest way to get your work done. Psychology teaches us that 'No' is not a word many people want to hear, especially if they feel strongly about something. It is the quickest way to alienate yourself from others. Instead, try listening closer for a change. When the other person feels that you are genuinely interested in hearing what he has to say, he will reciprocate the gesture and therefore be more accepting when you offer a counter-argument. Hear out the other person fully, then begin by nodding your head and a gentle 'Yes, that's right. Have you considered...' If he feels you are respecting his views, he will respect yours. Surely if someone is vehemently defending a point, there must be a reason for it. Credit your colleagues with some intelligence! Put yourself in their shoes and try to see the situation from their perspective. It may be possible that you have not considered a different angle or alternative possibilities around the issue.

Attack the issue not the person

We all have certain impressions about the people we work with. We don't always like all of them, there are some with whom we get along better than with others. However, at the time of conflict, personal prejudices must be kept aside. You need to project the right image. Come across as a professional who finds the point of contention and its subject matter disagreeable, rather than the person who is delivering it. Drag meandering issues back to the topic of discussion and stick to it. Never ever introduce a personal motif in the arguments or dig out similar events that happened in the past making insinuations of blame. Even when resolving conflict amongst other members of your team, avoid practising favouritism. It is a sure-shot way of losing the respect of your co-workers.

Anticipate and come prepared

There is nothing like letting your work do the talking for you. If you think a particular situation may blow up into something more explosive, controversial or conflict-inducing, get one step ahead of it. Enlist the help of a close friend and think through the various objections that could be raised or problems that could arise at the time. The good folk at Microsoft call this a session of 'Rude Questions'. What are the worst possible challenges that could arise? How would you handle them most gracefully? Do your homework well and arm yourself with answers rather than anger.

Take it slowly

When introducing a radical change in your office environment, it is often a good idea to do so in small phases so that people don't get a rude shock. Most of us don't like changes, no matter how much we acknowledge that changes are a part of life and no change means stagnation. It is natural human tendency to resist change. It means that the things that your colleagues were familiar and comfortable with, even if they were not the best, are not going to be the same again. So get people to agree to change of a limited extent and then expand on it gradually until the entire idea is rolled out. This will give people time to get used to the new situation.

Get assistance

One of the final steps to take when you sense something may develop into an unpleasant situation is to get the key players over to your side. Convince the leaders using the angles that work with them (by talking numbers, risk, impact, or whatever relevant appeals) and then use their acknowledged leadership to convert the others in the team to your views by proxy. You will ensure that your ideas are well received and not viewed as threatening, disrupting, or regressive.

Conflict can be a time for discussion, reflection and action. If viewed positively, it can be a great building block of vibrant team dynamics that can reap huge benefits.

About the author:

Devyani Borade is a Software Tester currently working with a Web solutions provider near London. She started her career as a Software Programmer and has performed a variety of roles including Team Leader and Quality Manager.

In addition to writing, Devyani likes reading Calvin & Hobbes comics, eating chocolates and trying her husband's patience.