

The Meeting After the Meeting

Productive disagreement is specific, learnable, and most leadership teams have never practiced it.

You know the one. The actual meeting ends. Everyone files out. And then, in the hallway, in the parking lot, in the Slack message sent twenty minutes later — the real conversation happens. The one with the actual opinions in it. The one where someone finally says what they thought the whole time but didn't say in the room.

Every organization has a meeting after the meeting. Most leaders know it exists. Almost none of them have figured out how to move that conversation into the room where it belongs.

This is the problem productive disagreement solves. Not conflict. Not argument. Not the theatrical kind of debate where everyone performs their positions for an audience. Productive disagreement — the kind that makes decisions better, surfaces what leaders actually need to know, and builds trust rather than eroding it.

It is specific. It is learnable. And most leadership teams have never actually practiced it.

Why Deciding to Disagree More Doesn't Work

The typical organizational response to this problem is a decision. Leadership team off-site, someone says “we need to be more open with each other,” everyone agrees, and then the next Monday morning meeting looks exactly like every Monday morning meeting before it.

Deciding to be more honest is like deciding to be taller. The intention is real. The result is not.

What actually works is learning specific moves, practicing them until they become habits, and then building a culture where those habits are expected rather than exceptional. That is a different kind of work — slower to start, faster to compound.

The move that matters most is also the hardest one. It is not making the argument. It is staying genuinely curious after someone pushes back on it. Most leaders can state a position. Most leaders can even name their uncertainty, which is rarer. What almost no one does naturally is resist the urge to defend, explain, or redirect the moment they get a real challenge — and instead ask: say more about that.

That pause. That question. That is where productive disagreement lives.

What It Costs to Skip It

I have sat in a lot of leadership team meetings over the years. And I have noticed something consistent: the organizations that are best at appearing aligned are often the ones paying the highest price for it.

The information that does not make it into the room does not disappear. It goes underground. It travels in the meeting after the meeting, in the conversations that happen around the decision rather than inside it. And at some point — usually at a moment that feels sudden to the people at the top and predictable to everyone else — that underground information surfaces as a crisis.

The strategies that fail in execution for reasons nobody can explain. The talented people who leave without warning. The problems everyone knew about and nobody said out loud until it was too late to fix them.

The cost of not disagreeing productively is not zero. It just gets paid later, and with interest.

What It Looks Like When It Works

An organization where productive disagreement is the norm looks different from the outside and feels different from the inside.

From the outside: decisions are more durable. Execution is tighter. The gap between what leadership thinks is happening and what is actually happening is small and closing, rather than large and widening.

From the inside: leaders describe receiving information that is more complete, more challenging, and more useful than what they used to get. People who used to hold back start bringing the harder version of their view. The real conversation starts happening in the room.

That shift does not happen because leadership announced that it should. It happens because specific leaders changed specific behaviors — learned to stay curious under pressure, learned to reward the uncomfortable truth, learned to be honest themselves when it cost them something.

That is the practice. It is not complicated. It is just harder than it looks.

If this is the meeting your organization is having in the hallway, let's talk. Not about frameworks or models — about what is actually happening in your leadership team's room, and what it would take to change it. One conversation is usually enough to know whether there is work worth doing here.