Paul Graham's Hierarchy of Disagreement

Disagreement is a normal part of work and life, but some ways of disagreeing are far more useful than others. In his 2008 essay How to Disagree, the programmer and writer Paul Graham described seven levels of disagreement and numbered them from zero to six. Others later drew these levels as a pyramid, with insults at the bottom and the strongest arguments at the top. The higher we climb, the more our disagreement deals with ideas instead of people. Here, we group the seven levels into four steps: attacking the person, missing the point, arguing with reasons, and refuting the central point.

1. Attacking the Person

The two lowest levels attack the person, not the idea. Level zero is name-calling: simple insults, such as calling someone stupid or lazy. Graham notes that a polite-sounding insult is still just name-calling. Level one is ad hominem, a Latin phrase that means against the person: it attacks the speaker's character, motives or position instead of what they said. For example, saying that a manager supports a plan only because it helps his own department says nothing about whether the plan is good.

Example: in an online discussion about a new park, one neighbour calls another an idiot, and nobody learns anything about the park.

At work: Reem, a marketing manager, proposes a new campaign. A colleague replies that she joined the company only last year, so she cannot know what works. This attacks Reem, not her proposal.

2. Missing the Point

The next two levels are more polite, but they still miss the point. Level two is responding to tone: we criticise how something was said, for example that it sounds arrogant or too harsh, instead of what was said. Graham argues that tone matters much less than whether the author is right. Level three is contradiction: we simply state the opposite view, with little or no evidence. Saying that an idea will never work may feel like an argument, but it gives the other person nothing to examine.

Example: a customer writes an angry review about a late delivery, and the shop replies only that the review is rude.

At work: in a meeting, Reem suggests moving the launch date. One colleague complains that her email was too direct, and another simply says that the date will not change. Neither reply explains why the date should stay.

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3. Arguing with Reasons

Real disagreement starts at level four, counterargument: we state our view and support it with reasons or evidence. A counterargument is useful, but Graham warns that it is often aimed at something slightly different from what the other person actually said. Level five, refutation, fixes this problem. We quote or restate the exact point we disagree with, and then explain why it is mistaken. Refutation takes more effort, because we must first understand the other view properly.

Example: two friends plan a trip, and when one says that flying is cheaper, the other shows the real train and flight prices for their dates.

At work: a finance colleague says that Reem's campaign is too expensive. Reem repeats his exact concern, then shows that the cost of winning each new customer is lower than in last year's campaign.

4. Refuting the Central Point

The highest level is refuting the central point: showing that the main idea of an argument is wrong. Graham calls it the most powerful form of disagreement, because it answers what really matters. He also warns against a dishonest shortcut: attacking a few small errors, such as a wrong number or a spelling mistake, and then acting as if the whole argument has failed. A true refutation names the main claim clearly and shows why it does not hold. When both sides argue at this level, the discussion moves forward instead of going in circles.

Example: a student questions a grade by showing that the main answer was actually correct, not by pointing out a spelling mistake in the teacher's comments.

At work: a director argues that the campaign will fail because young customers do not read emails. Reem does not argue about a small error in his figures. Instead, she shows survey results that most young customers open the monthly email, which answers his main claim.

Conclusion

In summary, Paul Graham's hierarchy shows that disagreement can be weak or strong. Name-calling and ad hominem attack the person, responding to tone and contradiction miss the point, counterargument and refutation bring reasons, and refuting the central point answers what really matters. Graham also noted that arguments at the higher levels tend to be less mean and more useful. The hierarchy helps us judge the arguments we hear, and also check our own. Before we reply in the next disagreement, it helps to check which level we are on, and to climb at least one step higher.

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