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Goal-Oriented Communication

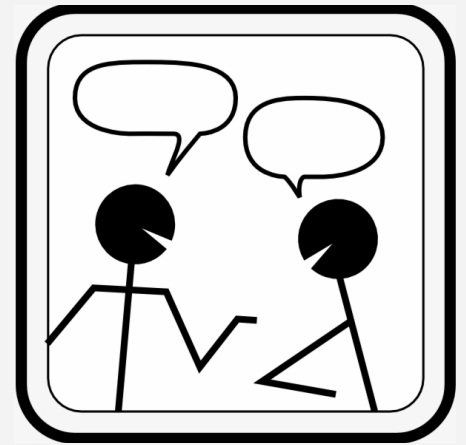
SIR, MA'AM, COULD WE PLEASE DISCUSS...?

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Being in a place where authority matters as much as it does at West Point can be hard to navigate, especially at first. As a plebe (first-year cadet), I used to argue with teachers to get what I wanted. Whether that was a change in my grade, or merely more explanation when it came to a difficult course concept, I sometimes regret making demands the way I did.

That being said, my requests were often justified. And regardless, everyone is entitled to some transparency in their workspace—the ability to request clarification as well as discuss or even debate the reasoning for various decisions and policies. **What this guide offers is advice on how to approach hard moments like these through goal-oriented communication.**

Goal-oriented approaches will ultimately help you get more of what you want. Just as importantly, you'll stay calmer in the process *and* ensure that you convey an appropriate amount of respect for authority figures. The bottom line is that learning to present concerns, negotiate conflict, and maintain positive work relationships are invaluable skills for any profession.



What *not* to do

Argue your position.

By this I mean holding fast to the idea that you are right and the other person is wrong. Arguing your position can actually distract you from emphasizing its benefits—the real reasons you're having the conversation. Moreover, oftentimes the thing you want will benefit your interlocutor just as much as it will you. Successful negotiators help people to see that both parties are on the same team.

Tell them that you are right.

Even when you are right—you've been saying all along what your interlocutor only realizes in the course of your discussion—there's no need to tell them that. Pointing out others' flaws or confusion only slows down your progress; especially when the person is your superior, such comments will often make things worse. In reality, a superior taking a long time to understand what you were trying to tell them can say just as much about your skills as a communicator as it does their ability to listen.

Offer unsolicited advice.

This can be a hard pill to swallow. As a subordinate, you help develop your leaders in very different ways than superiors develop you. This isn't to suggest that a good leader shouldn't solicit feedback, but regardless, whenever you do provide feedback do it with care. It may not be appropriate, for instance, to suggest a different way of teaching a class—one that better suits your needs—without first asking your professor if they'd like to hear it. Even then, consider suggestive questions rather than directives. Reflect on the purpose of the conversation to make sure you are succinct and do not overstep any boundaries.

What to do

Here's a common West Point example for our purposes: let's say you're approaching your commissioning advisor to request a specific summer detail...

Know what you want when you walk in—and be strategic in how you say it.

It may seem silly, but sometimes we walk into conversations more frustrated than focused. It's critical in professional conversations, though, that you concentrate on your purpose rather than your feelings. Even if you feel like you truly deserve the position, and that your commissioning advisor isn't responding quickly enough to your concerns, try not to dwell on these things lest they overrun you and distract you from your real purpose.

Instead, remind yourself that you are having this conversation because you want a specific summer schedule—not to tell your advisor why they are moving too slowly. It may be useful to have a list of reasons why you deserve to go in case you are asked—pro-tip: introduce such reasons only after asking permission (“May I share some of my reasoning with you?”)—but don't lead with the belief that you deserve the position.

Understand whom you're talking to.

This line probably means something different than what you're used to. We all understand that every person is unique and that understanding persons as individuals will help you talk to them more effectively. While this is true and important, there is another part of the equation that we sometimes forget.

Professional relationships have specific expectations. Therefore, no matter how close you and your advisor, or instructor, may be there are still certain behavioral expectations to uphold. Understanding someone's superior professional position while also recognizing the specific dimensions of their personality will enhance your ability to communicate with them. The conversation between you and your advisor could have a completely different tone if he or she is also a close mentor to you, but ultimately, they're still your advisor—so refrain from vulgar language or overly emotional appeals as you work to persuade them.

Have an escape route.

If a conversation isn't going how you'd expected and you're getting frustrated, take a moment to refocus. If that doesn't help, be open to graciously or diplomatically cutting things short. Sometimes escape routes can be as simple as expressing gratitude and making space for the next conversation: “Well, thank you for listening; I sincerely appreciate it. Thank you for taking time to consider things.”

Escape routes can also take the form of explicit time limits, so you have a built-in reason to keep the conversation from dragging on. This helps safeguard your own feelings and sense of balance while also respecting the time and decision space of a superior. While it's valid to be upset when you feel that you are being wronged, emotional outbursts to your superior aren't going to help your cause. Having an escape route minimizes the likelihood of such incidents.

Escape Route Tip:

Remember, when you are a subordinate in a discussion, it's best to ask before leaving! Trust me, I've fumbled a graceful exit before. It can appear as if you are walking away from a discussion, possibly even storming out, which is usually not the effect you're going for. Leaving on good terms is essential—there will almost always be another conversation.



Don't Neglect Empathy!

Sometimes, you may not get exactly what you want even if you really feel that you deserve it. In those cases, remember that your superior is likely also operating under external pressures and constraints. Don't assume they're just unwilling to help.

In conclusion...

Ultimately, when you find yourself in charged discussions, particularly in hierarchical professional situations, it's all about staying focused on your goal and on respect—for yourself and your superior. Bearing this in mind will help you keep your cool and ultimately grow as a professional. It's not always easy, nor does it always feel good. Grace takes time to develop. But no matter what profession you're in, there are bound to be power struggles. Learning to navigate the tricky conversations that unfold around them will be key to your success.