



Devil's Advocate: The Devil You Say

By Thomas Herrington

It's happened to all of us. You have an idea, which on the surface looks like it has merit, so you decide to share it with your co-workers. That's when it happens. That's when the devil's advocate suddenly appears out of nowhere, and you cringe at the words, "Let me play devil's advocate...."

When someone says, "Let me play devil's advocate," what that person is really saying is, "Let me ridicule and pick at your idea in front of everyone." People who play devil advocates aren't expecting you to hold anything against them because after all they say that they are "only playing devil's advocate."

Of course, you are going to hold what the devil advocate says against them. It's just human nature, and if you are like most people, you will look for the first opportunity to pay the devil advocates back. Give the devil his due.

These devil's advocates thrive in environments where knowledge is highly valued. When new hypotheses, ideas or strategies are tested, you will see people suddenly morph into devil's advocates, specifically in the fields of technology, programming, research, system design, systems architecture and engineering.

Playing the devil's advocate is a win-lose game, one that no one really wants to play, or wants to lose. Battling with a devil's advocate is not a fun game. Just ask those people who have been on the receiving end of a devil's advocate. They can be bitter and angry, spent from the fighting, or even worse, may give up entirely.

The next time you see a devil's advocate emerge, watch the person on the receiving end. Does that person open up or shut down after being questioned? Does he or she talk positively or get defensive? Lastly, is there a winner and loser?

Undoubtedly, we have all been the victims of a devil's advocate, and most certainly sometime in our lives, we have played the part of the devil's advocate, too. What is important to know is that a devil's advocate destroys creativity and is called a "Devil" for good reason. People do not want to share their thoughts when at any moment in time they can be subjected to a competitive battle of wits.

There is a better way! If you question an idea or concept someone has, you don't have to turn into a devil's advocate to find answers or voice objections. Instead of attacking an idea, try a different approach. Suggest that you study the idea together. Validate the idea under different circumstances. If the idea has problems, discuss how those problems can be fixed. If there are holes, talk about how to fill them? If the idea will not work, discuss there alternatives.

Offering to study is more than just semantics. Studying is the positive opposite of challenge. Studying creates partnerships and leads to goodwill. Even if you think being a devil's advocate may help people to be more prepared, studying accomplishes the same benefit, but studying does not damage relationships and business rapport.

You would never play devil's advocate with an outside customer. Why? You don't want to ruin the chances of building a relationship or damaging the one you have. So is it proper to become a devil's advocate with co-workers or employees? Probably not.

The next time someone says to you, "Let me play devil's advocate," tell them, "No thanks, but I would like your participation in studying the idea." And should you be tempted to play devil's advocate and rip away at a fresh idea, stop. Offer to help study the idea instead. You will be received as a valuable asset, not as an antagonist. At the very least you will not have someone gunning for you when you have an idea.

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