

How leaders can get their teams to push back

Written by

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Key topics

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Imperial research has identified evidence-based strategies managers can use to build teams with the confidence to challenge them.

Companies hire people for a reason – because they value their knowledge, skills and experience. Making the most of those hires, however, can be difficult if they don't feel they can challenge their bosses when they have bad ideas or suggest inappropriate courses of action.

There is hardly an organisation anywhere that has not struggled with this problem. In 2023, [a report from the National Guardian's Office](#) found that many NHS staff did not feel comfortable speaking up to challenge decisions and practices, even when patients' lives were on the line. And in 2021, Credit Suisse lost \$5.5 billion following the collapse of Archegos Capital, with [a report finding](#) that "a cultural unwillingness to engage in challenging discussions" was a major factor in the crisis.

Clearly, a corporate culture in which employees do not have the confidence to challenge leaders carries risks of significant financial loss and organisational failure. So how can leaders build teams that do have the confidence to challenge them where necessary?

[Our research](#) identifies a number of evidence-based strategies leaders can use to help foster a culture of positive, constructive challenge, which can both mitigate risk and improve decision making.

Experimental approach

We worked with the Financial Services Culture Board and conducted an 18-month field study in a global financial institution. As part of the project, we set up, transcribed and analysed data from 43 meetings in which leaders asked their teams to put forward ideas to mitigate some of the institution's emerging risks.

Secretly, the leaders were asked to endorse the idea that they, in fact, believed was the worst one raised during the meeting. We wanted to see how team members responded to this – whether they endorsed or challenged it. And if they did challenge it, whether we could identify anything that the leaders did that encouraged their dissent.

Below, we summarise some of the techniques we found to be the most and least effective in eliciting challenge from teams.

Do's

- **Ask for challenge:** People generally want to do what their superiors ask them to do. So, rather than using open-ended or general questions, frame the question in terms of the challenge you want (e.g. “what reasons are there not to do this?”). This allows your team to challenge you because you've explicitly asked for it.
- **Make staff accountable:** Although people may be reluctant to challenge leaders, they are usually even less keen to be responsible for a bad course of action. As a result, making staff feel accountable for their viewpoints tends to encourage challenge. This can be through questions (e.g. “which of the two options do you prefer?”) or asking team members to vote on different courses of action.

- **Request disagreement:** Leaders are more likely to ask whether people agree than disagree with them. However, the natural tendency to defer to authority means the other person likely will say they agree. In the same way, asking for disagreement helps individuals feel confident enough to disagree, as it makes clear that dissent is an option.
- **Respond appropriately:** It's logical to assume that thanking team members for their contributions will encourage them and others to speak up, but we actually found that gratitude is associated with a lower likelihood that challenge will follow. Acknowledging challenge as legitimate (e.g. "I think that's a fair comment") is a much surer way of eliciting further challenge.
- **Keep it fun and interactive:** We found a significant correlation between the amount of challenge offered and the proportion of team members who spoke in a meeting. To encourage this, leaders can take an active role in engaging those who are yet to speak, and use jokes and conversation to help team members feel comfortable participating.

Don'ts

- **Don't put people on the spot:** Asking individuals directly for their views makes them feel like a spotlight is shining on them: vulnerable and exposed. This means they're more likely to say what they think they should – which usually means agreeing with whatever their boss has said – than what they really believe.
- **Avoid pleading or being too general:** Equally, pleading for input with general, open-ended questions (e.g. "anyone have any thoughts?") risks going too far the other way – there is no pressure on team members to contribute meaningfully, so they are more likely to automatically agree and avoid the discomfort of challenging.
- **Don't squeeze the discussion in:** When leaders don't leave enough time for frank discussion, challenge is less likely. There's no precise figure for how long a meeting should be, but leaders should allow time for people to feel comfortable and freely debate ideas. Asking "Any questions?" a minute before the end is not likely to yield constructive contributions.

Right environment

We can summarise these principles with a simple acronym: ACTS – accountability, conversations, time and solicitation. Building a working environment on these pillars

can help to instil a culture of challenge, where staff speak out about what they feel is best for the business, regardless of hierarchy.

This article draws on findings from “[Facilitating Constructive Challenge: Concrete Ways Leaders Recruit \(and Repress\) Speaking Up](#)” by Celia Moore, Kate Coombs, Minjie Gao and Juliane Schittek (Imperial College London).

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About Celia Moore

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Celia's teaching sits at the intersection of leadership and ethics, and she is particularly interested in supporting individuals to enact their moral agency responsibly. She has worked with several organisations on how to support more ethical behaviour at work, including the UK's Financial Conduct Authority, the Institute of Chartered Accountants of England & Wales, the UK's National Health Service, the International Anti-Corruption Academy in Vienna, the Brookings Institute in Washington, and several major financial institutions.

Before joining Imperial, she held positions at Bocconi University in Milan and London Business School, where she was on the faculty for nine years. She has also been a visiting scholar at Harvard Business School and a Fellow of the Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics at Harvard University. She is currently an Academic Fellow of the Ethics and Compliance Initiative and sits on the UK's Banking Standards Board Assessment Steering Committee.

Read [Celia's Imperial Profile](#) for more information and publications.

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