

Opinion **Office life**

There is nothing wrong with changing your mind

Aversion to debate and organisational silence run deep in many corporations

MARGARET HEFFERNAN



Meeting face to face makes it harder to demonise the other side; both are rarely perfect and relationships start to develop © Skynasher/Getty Images

Margaret Heffernan 4 HOURS AGO

When I was running [tech companies](#) in the 1990s, I had an investor who was a bully. He would routinely dress down chief executive officers in public to demonstrate that they were wrong and stupid. Wounded, the CEOs would retreat, muttering that there was no point discussing anything with him — he was never going to change his mind.

Aversion to debate and [organisational silence](#) run deep in corporations, primarily due to the fear of conflict. Studies have shown that we are all biased, preferring people and [media we agree with](#), and that our brains are lazy, preferring consensus to conflict. And the internet allows people to retreat from differing points of view into private bubbles. It is easy and tempting to conclude, like my sulky CEO colleagues, that argument is just a waste of time.

I beg to differ. After all, if we never changed our minds, we would still be living in caves. The question isn't how to avoid conflict but how to do it well. For Eileen Carroll, shifting perspective is critical. A QC, she founded the [Centre for Effective Dispute Resolution](#) (full disclosure: I am one of its trustees) because she believed the brutal win/lose environment of the courtroom was too often unproductive.

The centre mediates everything from consumer complaints to large commercial disputes. When asked how she was so often able to get people to compromise, she cited tools that were dauntingly modest: listening, questions, patience and time. In exchange for telling their side of the story, people must listen to the other side. They often discover they had not known all the facts and the two sides frequently start to develop a common language.

Meeting face to face makes it harder to demonise the other side; both are rarely perfect and relationships start to develop. Taking time to reconsider overnight often helps. Ms Carroll is admired for her patience but also her rigour; people need time, she says, but also momentum and it is her job to balance the two. When I asked her what absolutely did not work, she was adamant: [belligerence](#), mockery, shouting, lack of eye contact and emotional meltdowns. All these behaviours are frequently on display at UK prime minister's question time. No wonder we've lost faith in the value of debate.

But there are better ways to work. Political scientist James Fishkin has been experimenting with deliberative polling since 1994, bringing together people in 28 different countries to discuss hot-button issues. Participants are provided with briefing documents that experts on all sides agree are balanced and fair. Discussions take place in small groups. Prof Fishkin measures opinions privately before and after the discussion. He repeatedly finds that people read the materials carefully and do change their minds. "The public," he told me, "are not stupid, and if you engage them in a thoughtful and balanced way with good information and they think their voice matters, they turn out to be very smart."

Boards, executive committees and shareholders should understand and practice these processes. But most are too afraid or unskilled. I have seen too many stand-offs where a change of mind was resisted because it was deemed a humiliating climbdown. I have sat in too many boardrooms listening to hostile silence. And I have seen too many poor decisions that, with time and a genuine capacity to listen, might have become good ones. Conflict helps organisations think and progress. We all need to do it much better.

Eventually, I found a way to work with my investor. I never confronted him in public. I sent materials I wanted to discuss ahead of time. Face to face, we had civil conversations and I rarely pressed him for an immediate response. He was (and is) a brilliant man. Over time, we built trust and respect. And I changed my mind about him.

The writer is author of 'Wilful Blindness'