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Andrew Horabin



Board 101

SHIFTING THE BULL IN THE BOARDROOM

Author Andrew Horabin, a facilitator from The Bullshift Company, shared his tips at a recent AICD WA Director Download session.

We know that boards work best with diverse perspectives and robust discussion. But how do you have the most open, honest and direct conversation possible?

Don't compete. Collaborate

In the heat of an otherwise healthy exchange, an ego may emerge and compete for credit, influence or personal agenda. The first thing we teach people is to be aware of their ego and how it can crash the conversation.

The ego needs a gentle reminder that we're here to collaborate for the benefit of others. Most organisations better compete externally when they collaborate internally – and it's best to start at the top. To compete is to be self-interested or possessive. To collaborate is to overcome our individual ego for a higher cause. To collude is something else altogether and not recommended for boards.

Don't be defensive. Be curious

Defensive reactions vary greatly and include sniping, huffing, blaming, sulking, interrupting, denying, throwing stationery and changing your relationship settings from warm to frosty.

Defensiveness is just the ego showing how insecure it is. So when you get defensive, be curious. Ask a genuine question (one you don't know the answer to) then listen. Focus on understanding before judging.

Most of us are not safe to talk to when we're being defensive. If you want more people to be honest with you, be less defensive and more curious. If you'd like people to talk *about* you rather than *to* you, just be defensive – it works every time.

Don't use sarcasm. Say it straight or don't say it

Most boards are adept at being direct but if there's one bull in the boardroom that really needs shifting, it's sarcasm – passive-aggressive sideswipes, loaded jokes and not-so-subtle hints. You can end up with more subtext than text, which means there's more being implied than actually said.

If you have something important to say, drop the subtext and be clear about it. And if you're just using sarcasm to chuck your stuff at other people, maybe you should take it to therapy instead.

Sarcasm can be fun – but don't use it as a weapon or shield. That way we never have to wonder, "Was that person joking?" or "Were they trying to tell me something?" Like we don't have anything better to do.

Don't express opinion as fact. Express opinion as opinion

Everybody expresses opinion as fact and often it doesn't matter; for example, when people are chatting about life, saying, "That film was brilliant" or "The Eagles should have won that game". We know they're just opinions.

However, it *does* matter in the boardroom. A dominant person can unduly influence a conversation and shape the views of others by expressing their opinions as if they are facts.

Decisions made in boardrooms can affect the lives of tens of thousands of people, so we must always consciously separate the opinions from the facts and not express one as the other.

Or, at least, that's what I think. Do you have a different view?

I'm curious.