

# Can a blazing row at work be productive?



By Tom Geoghegan  
BBC News Magazine

**An almighty row in the workplace could help creative thinking if properly managed, according to new research. So does a consensual attitude strangle what you're trying to achieve?**

If you are reading this at work, look around you. Is there anyone you really want to shout at? Now could be your chance to do so, safe in the knowledge that it's good for dealing with the task at hand.

New research suggests that companies would prosper by encouraging a robust exchange of ideas, even if this descends into a heated argument, because in this way policy and vision are constantly innovated and improved.

So while a row should never be personal, having the odd shout at a colleague about work could be advantageous.

"Great strategy emerges when people are encouraged to challenge the status quo, ask awkward questions and examine

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Judi James  
Workplace psychologist

'sacred cows'," says a report by strategy consultants Cognosis, based on a survey of more than 1,000 executives from across the business world.

If conflict is well managed then it can nurture creativity because a "Darwinian struggle of ideas" means the best win out, says Cognosis managing director Richard Brown.

### **Verbal attacks**

"Heated debate can trigger creative or intuitive breakthroughs but needs to be handled very carefully. It helps if the team has previously built an environment of mutual respect, support and trust, and has agreed some clear ground rules for managing heated conflict.

"Voices may become raised and discussion heated, but people need to be aware of and manage their and the team's emotions."

It should never descend to personal verbal attacks, the pursuit of partisan or personal agendas or questioning other team members' integrity, he says. These trigger what he describes as a "doom loop of dysfunctional debate".

"Debates should be resolved in the meeting, not left 'hanging' or taken outside the meeting," he adds. "It surely goes without saying that abuse, whether verbal or physical should never be part of the process."

And heated arguments should be behind closed doors so as not to disrupt the office. Emotional outbursts damage morale and increase stress.

"Followers expect their leaders to have and show emotional intelligence, and sudden outbursts demonstrate precisely the opposite - they're interpreted as a lack of emotional control and

#### **HOW TO ARGUE**

- ◆ Direct, assertive, high-energy exchanges can trigger breakthrough thinking
- ◆ No personal agendas
- ◆ Listen, ask 'why', try to understand other viewpoints
- ◆ Use open and encouraging body language, not defensive or closed
- ◆ Raised voices may be OK but keep tone civil
- ◆ Don't think winners/losers, explore ideas to co-create winners/winners
- ◆ Ensure there's an agreed deadline for resolution

Source: Cognosis

undercut respect," he says.

### **Dead wood**

So what conclusion, in a nutshell, is all this research and analysis driving at?

"It's simple - a good row can clear the air," says Lindsay Burke, business development manager with Cognosis. "If you actively encourage challenge people become comfortable with it and can make better decisions."

Too few businesses encourage a healthy questioning of policy and vision, says Mr Brown. People are not given sufficient permission to challenge their bosses, and when they do it is often seen as a criticism and something to be controlled.

"Very often what looks like harmony is just passive acceptance, with people feeling that they don't have a say in discussions that generated this course of action.

"They think 'I just have to get my head down and get on with it.' That's not very motivating."

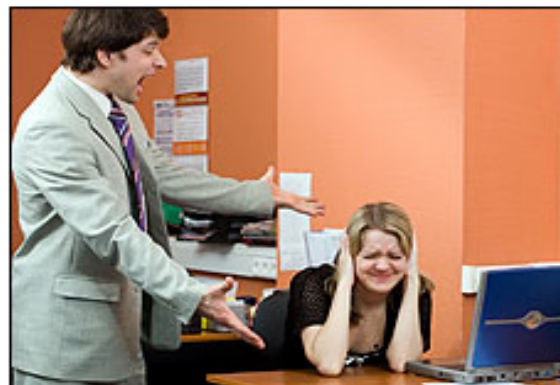
Viewers of BBC One's *The Apprentice* will be familiar with the shouting matches that characterise the show, as candidates go into meltdown in the pressure-cooker atmosphere of completing business-related tasks under the watchful eyes of Sir Alan Sugar and his helpers.

### **'Not my style'**

Michelle Dewberry, who won the show in 2006, says it wasn't a tactic she ever employed.

"Maybe I stood out from my *Apprentice* colleagues because they were too concerned with argument and not doing the job and that's not a good place to be," she says.

"There were occasions when people did shout and scream but I don't think anything productive ever came out of it. It wasn't my style then and it isn't my style now."



Is this man getting his point across?

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Although Sir Alan comes across as the kind of boss who would not take kindly to having his authority challenged, Ms Dewberry says that while working for him he was very receptive to new ideas from staff. It's the kind of attitude she has tried to foster as she runs both her own consultancy and a new money-saving website for women called Chiconomise.

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Michelle Dewberry recalls her time on The Apprentice

"You should always challenge people if you have a view opposite to them, but you should do it in a constructive way. I would never shout at anyone at work and I wouldn't expect anyone else to do it."

People need to challenge ideas more but it should never get more heated than a rational argument, says Judi James, who trains businesses in conflict management.

### **Angelic?**

"If you encourage people to have rows, at what point do you bring in a team of people to stop them committing acts of violence against each other?"

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She can't stand the atmosphere after a row, she says. Some people think it clears the air but many people will go home licking their wounds and being upset.

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However, we should be asking "why" a lot more in business, she says. The MPs' expenses scandal and the banking crisis should have empowered people to feel they have the right to question long-held assumptions.

"Business has a lot of dead wood that people don't challenge, instead saying 'this is the way we've always done it' and people are cloned to think like that," she says.

"People suck up to the boss and won't say what they think. But there's a difference between saying what you think and shouting and getting into a row.

"Once you get into a 'toe-to-toe', it creates more entrenched ideas. The chances of people changing their minds diminishes as the shouting gets louder."



Getting up close is always inadvisable