

## CONSTRUCTIVE CONTROVERSY

When different opinions clash with one another during a discussion, those involved can do one of two things:

- they can either try to harmonize their points of view in order to avoid to avoid the emergence of a conflict (avoidance strategy);
- or they can fight for their opinions and debate them intensively (debate strategy).

The avoidance strategy has a strong disadvantage: looking (too) quickly for a consensus might prevent from seriously analyzing the issues and discovering underlying elements of fundamental importance.

In the professional environment particularly, when teams are in charge of preparing or making decisions, an in-depth discussion of the respective points of view and arguments is of key importance in order to make sure that the solution finally chosen is indeed the best. This means going back to the principles of the dialectical method in order to improve problem solving by enriching, through debate, the thought process in the team concerned.

Doing this, however, is challenging! One must indeed be able to fight intellectually without jeopardizing personal relationships. In order to succeed in doing this, it is useful to distinguish between perception and truth.

According to Socrates, those who mix up truth on the one hand with their own perceptions and personal convictions on the other hand. He even viewed this mixing up as the root of all evil in human relationships. For him, human beings are allowed to be convinced based upon their personal experiences and perceptions; however, they should not pretend to know the truth, for they cannot possibly eliminate the risk of being victim of an error or illusion.

Furthermore, those who do not recognize the limitation of their knowledge are intolerant. Tolerance does not mean saying: *I'm happy to restate my point in the hope that you will once reach my level of understanding.* Tolerance is rather the attitude of saying: *None of us knows the truth. What we know only reflects what we have perceived up to now. For that reason, it would be useful to jointly analyze what has led us to perceive the problem the way we do and the conclusions which we drew on that basis.*

When people debate in the spirit of constructive controversy, they confine themselves to exchanging their perceptions (not truths). This implies that they are ready to reconsider their point of view and even to modify it if, for instance, they discover something which they did not know or realize that facts or events, which seemed to be perfectly clear, were explained by reasons which they had never suspected.

In the framework of a constructive controversy, the only things that clash are the perception of one (and ultimately his or her personal conviction) with the perception of the other.

As long as the protagonists are open-minded and do not mix up perceptions and truth, the discussion of their respective perceptions might lead to a transformation of thesis and antithesis into a synthesis – which in turn will enlarge and enrich the thinking of all individuals involved. However, it might of course also be the case that the respective perceptions will remain controversial and the discussion will not result in a meeting of the minds and a synthesis.

*Based on a text written by [Ruedi Käch](#), professor at the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland*