

18 Ways to Handle the Argumentative Person

by Kevin Hogan

Genesis: Argument and Hostility From Boredom?

How could my boredom lead the way to making me hostile just minutes or seconds later?

How could my mental drifting bring on contempt and criticism?

And once you are dealing with the Argumentative Person(ality) how do you defuse the contempt, criticism and hostility?

And, lastly, what if you are the Argumentative Person (ality)?

Have you ever been in a conversation where you found your mind drifting, dreaming, and struggling to stay focused? Do you remember how it felt to try and listen as someone droned on and on?

When we are faced with a poor communicator, there can be many reasons for that "missed connection".

Often, *there are words and phrases that simply shut us down*, and prevent us from listening as well as we would like. Many times the person communicating is injecting so many *negative* words and ideas that we begin to feel down and heavy inside. It may just be that the person you are communicating with is boring you because the content of the communication is *all about them*, about stories you don't care to listen to, and people you have never met!

What if that poor communicator who is boring someone to tears...is you?

Ouch!

How would you know if you are the one who is inserting negative associations, bringing up insignificant details, droning on about you, you, you? How do you know if someone is really interested in what you have to say... that they are really engaged in the conversation? What is your method of observing whether or not the person or group is interested and intrigued, or tired and looking for the door?

As you move toward communication mastery, you begin to find that you learn from everyone you talk with. You will notice the subtle cues that tell you if you are in good rapport, speaking in a way that your audience understands, and using words that create desire and interest. You will be willing to identify in yourself those things that



push others away and prevent them from listening as well as you would like. This is a very potent aspect of self-awareness that allows you to stay fascinating to everyone around you!

Today, I want you to look at the areas of communication where people most often go wrong. You're going to find out how others upset you.

You will discover how you may have been alienating others and helping them to feel negative when they are around you.

As you read these scenarios, notice if you see yourself in them. You might as well take the time to be very honest about your style of communication and the effects you are having on those around you.

The Argumentative Communicator

Do you enjoy playing the devil's advocate? Are you constantly offering your opposing opinion when it is not asked for? Do you find yourself saying the word "but" often in your conversation with others?

You may be an argumentative "talker." There is an effective way to take an opposing view of others opinions, beliefs and values, but it may destroy rapport. There is a way to give your opinion, but it may be received as unwanted advice. When you continue to oppose the comments of your listener, you run the risk of making them feel wrong, stupid, or uninformed.

Men and women seem to view communication differences in different ways. I often notice that men will say, "we had a debate" or "an intense conversation" and women will indicate that they had "a fight" or an "argument."

The argumentative communicator, whether a man or a woman, should be aware that their communication efforts may immediately be perceived as a "fight" (the worst of the four above labels) regardless of the intent of the communicator.



I have a confession to make. I was in debate in high school and like Jack Welch (former CEO of GE) I find a good debate stimulating and enlightening. Debate generally can be described as a structured discussion where individuals cite evidence about an issue in an attempt to persuade another person. Debate is an intellectual process where it is OK and preferable to be "right." While I do enjoy debating very much, I do not enjoy arguing, which is emotionally based.

Arguing is where two or more people disagree about some subject, they raise their voices and make the discussion personal by bringing in the other person's intentions.

What's the difference then between debate and an argument?

In debate, we cite evidence with the intent to persuasively validate our point of view. It is like a chess game.

In arguments, we cite evidence, make claims about the negative intention of the other person's behavior, and become very emotional to the point where apologies will be in order after the communication is finished because one or both parties will have their feelings hurt. In an argument, the individual feels attacked. When the attack is perceived as hostile, with intention to harm, I call this a "fight."

Perceptions are tricky things. One person may be simply debating or discussing a subject intellectually with no intent to harm. The other person may perceive such communication as intending to harm them and they feel as if they are in a fight with a need to defend themselves instead of their point of view!

Sometimes it takes quite a long time for the person who is debating to finally figure out that the other person is upset and fighting.

There are no easy and clearly defined answers to rapidly determine whether someone thinks YOU are arguing, fighting, debating or discussing. Therefore it is vital to ask if it's "OK to have this conversation" or at least smile. It's also important to keep sarcasm out of discussions and debates if it isn't obvious to the other person that you are having fun with them...instead of poking fun at them.

The argumentative communicator always needs to be right.

They want to defeat their opponent as if the dining room, the bedroom (a really stupid place to create negative anchors!), the boardroom is a courtroom where only one person can "win."

Whether at home, on the road, or in business, it's critical to remember that it's very easy for no one to win.

This doesn't mean to stop disagreeing or intellectually pursuing what is good and right. It is very important to make sure those we have discussions with do not feel attacked.



There is an additional problem. You and I both know that we often take possession of our ideas as if they were our identity. If people's ideas and verbalized thoughts are always experienced at the level of one's identity, then all debate will become perceived as fighting or arguing. Therefore, when this pattern of communication erupts, it's important to separate the idea from the person. This doesn't stop discussion and debates from becoming arguments and fights but it does add clarity to the conversation.

The Magical Question...

If you are discussing something with someone and they perceive you as argumentative, I suggest you ask the person, "**How can I present counter examples and other points of view to you so that you are not offended and your feelings are not hurt?**" I thought of this wonderful question many times when it was simply too late to ask.

If you experience numerous people saying things like, "you just love to argue don't you?" or "why do you always argue with me" or "I don't want to fight with you," then regardless of whether you are fighting with people or not, you need to reconsider your approach to communication so you are perceived as less abrasive.

Many times people who are intellectuals (whether they are "intellectual snobs" or not!) are considered argumentative simply because they have such a broad or deep knowledge about something that they are constantly the individual with superior knowledge about a subject.

This can lead others to feeling inferior. In these situations it can be useful for the person perceived as superior and therefore the one who often puts others "on edge" or "on the defensive" to reduce the number of verbalizations in a communication and "tighten up their communication." Make long speeches shorter. Ask more questions and have fewer total words spoken in dialogue.

KEYPOINT: Remember: Where one person seems to know everything, the other person is not necessary...or at least that's how they feel.

Most brilliant people got that way because they were incredibly inquisitive. This too can become a problem. Asking questions of others is a great way to learn about how others feel, think and believe but believe it or not...there are lines that can be crossed here as well!

I've found myself asking questions when I used to argue like it was a hobby...questions that were sharp and cutting and critical by implication.

I stopped that habit but even ceasing intentional criticism or contempt is not always enough for how others FEEL about you. What they PERCEIVE you are TRYING TO SAY with your questions.

There are other problems that come from great inquisitors....notice how that word (it may not be a word by the way) is like the word inquisition? Yeah... me too. Lots of people FEEL like your questions are not questions but interrogation whether you intend that or not. Sometimes you're just trying to figure out the person or their thinking process and all of a sudden you are called a "cop" or "police officer" or something similar.

Information Processors vs. Verbalizers

Some people process their "thoughts" through their "feelings." You can ask them what they are thinking and they will say things like:

"I don't know"

"Nothing"

"Not much"

"Nothing important"

... and so on. These people aren't planning major life events in their mind, they are simply in the moment...in their feelings; and because they process information differently from Verbalizing Thinkers, they often feel inadequate in a relationship or are pegged as poor communicators. In fact, they may **not** be good communicators, but they *can* improve their communication skills if others don't put an enormous amount of pressure on them.

If you are a person who takes time to process external information and you don't communicate well about information you have just received, a good strategy to appear more competent is to say things like:

"I need to consider what you've said...to ponder it."

"Let me think about what you've said. I'd like to talk with you tomorrow about it, when I've taken the time it deserves."

"My initial reaction is positive and I'd like to take some more time to consider it."



What this does is allow the two parties to know that there is no problem with what was communicated by the verbalizing party and that they are indeed considering the information, not ignoring it; as Verbalizers often feel others are doing "to them."

"Nonverbalizers" or "Information Processors" (people who use few words in the course of a day or a conversation) often become angry when they are asked to express more than they already have said. This leads them to argue from their *feeling* base. You would hear things like:

"Why do you always make me feel bad."

"You're mean."

"You don't respect my feelings."

..they might raise their voice and repeat the same sets of feelings or thoughts over and over; and they are now arguing.

Instead, the "Nonverbalizer" can share information like this:

"I'm starting to get upset but it's because I'm not able to put my feelings into words yet. I'm not upset with you and I don't want to be, so let me ponder this and let's talk again tomorrow about it."

Verbalizers

Meanwhile, the "Verbalizer" (people who share lots of information...almost streams of information in communication) get upset and angry when others don't respond in like kind. Someone who communicates 50 out of 60 minutes will feel the other person is "holding back" or "covering up" or that they just don't care. These things upset the "Verbalizer" and once upset, as with all communication about to go wrong...emotions will get the best of the Verbalizer and communication will deteriorate rapidly. Because the Verbalizer is able to deliver words in large volume and speed, the Verbalizer also is more likely to be deemed argumentative when he/she gets upset. Her voice will raise and become angry.

The Verbalizer needs to share their feelings now.

"I'm starting to become angry because I feel as if you are not sharing with me what I'm asking you for. **Am I reading you right?**"

It's very important that the Nonverbalizer doesn't take this communication as "blaming" because the Nonverbalizer is, by definition, someone who doesn't communicate as much and certainly not as quickly as a Verbalizer.

What can you do if you are dealing with an argumentative communicator?

- Tell the person you don't enjoy arguing, but that you will discuss options and ideas.
- Tell the person you respect their point of view, but disagree.
- If necessary, tell the person that this subject is something you don't wish to continue discussing because it is personal or volatile. (This is OK for business, of course, but not going to do the trick in long-term relationships.)
- Speak your point of view clearly and discuss what it would take for you to re-evaluate your point of view.
- Ask the person, "Is being right more important than my feelings?" (In other words, what is at stake? Safety? Life/Death? Some long-term issue? or Is it about whether you squeeze the toothpaste from the middle or end....)
- Suggest the person frame their comments in a more gentle fashion. "I know you aren't saying that to attack me, it just hurts when you say it that way."
- "Instead of yelling, allow yourself to speak calmly and then I'll be able to listen to you better."
- "If you stop calling me names when we talk, I'd be a lot less defensive."



Deal?"

Time Out!

What can you do if YOU are an argumentative communicator?

- Ask more questions.
- Be interested in how the other people in your life came to believe and think what they think.
- Be aware that not everyone perceives discussion, debate, arguing and fighting in the same way. Find out what those important to you believe about each of these things.
- Ask the important people in your life specifically how you can communicate with them to help them know you don't want to argue, but discuss.
- Determine why you need to be "right" or make someone else "wrong" in heated communications.
- Always think of your intention. Is your intention gentle? Speak more quietly. People associate quieter tones with gentler intentions.
- Show people you care in ways other than verbally so they know you care when you do argue.
- If you find yourself getting into a heated discussion, ask the other person if they feel you are arguing or discussing. Ask what the difference would be for them.
- Ask your friend/associate/partner how you can communicate without giving the appearance of arguing.
- Be certain that you make clear your intention so it is not misunderstood!



Already you have come a long way toward communicating more efficiently, effectively, and gently!

Kevin Hogan is the author of 22 books. He is an international speaker and go-to body language expert for media. He is best known for his international best selling book, *The Psychology of Persuasion: How to Persuade Others to Your Way of Thinking*. www.KevinHogan.net