

# **Experience Matters**

empowering the 50+

**Mike is a recently retired partner of a major accounting firm who now has a portfolio of public and private sector roles where his experience can add value.**

## **Dealing with younger 'experts' who do not necessarily value your experience**

I recently had to tell someone some bad news about their pet project. They did not accept any of the reasons I gave and in the heated discussion that followed accused me of being unprofessional, condescending and clouded by personal prejudice. Clearly not the outcome I wanted and it did not change the decision but what should I have done differently?

I had prepared thoroughly by going through all the documentation and putting the reasons for the rejection in what I thought was the right order, and then setting out the agenda of what I wanted to say and what I wanted the outcome to be. The problem is I forgot some of the basics, a meeting like this is not just about the information; it is about the people.

I should have put myself in the shoes of the other person; what are they like and how would they respond to feedback. I needed to have anticipated how they might react and I needed to think through what they had invested personally in the project and how they were likely to perceive me. The individual was an energetic committed individual who was highly skilled and quite experienced. I should have anticipated that they might believe that I was out of touch with what things are like now, that my experience was gained in another age and therefore they did not need to listen to me, I had nothing worth listening to- in fact they probably thought I was a 'has-been'.

Therefore, in my preparation I should have focussed on the other person and what language I should have used. By stating a reason up front in direct language all I did was get their back up. Perhaps I should have tried summarising the relevant facts and then asked them an open question so we could talk about the particular issue before coming to the reason. I may have decided that was the wrong approach but in my preparation I should have been thinking about how the other person would react, not what I had to say.

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In thinking of the other person I should also have done a check on what baggage I had on the issue. One of the issues when you have experience is just that, you are likely to have seen it before so if there was a problem in the past, does that cause us to think it will not work now? In this case I had baggage but the decision was not mine alone but did that baggage colour the way I gave the feedback. I should have given great thought to the language I was going to use and prepare for the different reactions I may have received. When people ask for feedback I always try to use active language that shows respect rather than tiptoeing about but I must be able to adapt and that can only be done by thinking things through in advance. An example is that in this case, my first piece of feedback was met with a very direct challenge. I had simply not prepared properly for that. I have dealt with this sort of reaction often in the past, but that did not stop me over reacting and ending up in an argument.

A few practical points in giving feedback came to mind when I was right in the middle of it. First slow down, we sped up and got louder and communicated less. Second, use pauses, if the other person is raising their voice and making statements, do not react, pause and wait before responding. Lastly, use summaries, try and summarise where you are, what has been agreed and where differences still exist.

After this meeting I wrote down what I thought had happened and what were the lessons I had learnt- what I did well, what not so well and what I will do different next time. I then shared those lessons with colleagues who really helped as they always do. The old saying about a shared problem being half what it was before is so true.

In summary:

Make sure preparation covers more than marshalling the information and setting out your agenda, make sure it includes thinking thoroughly about the other person

Be calm and not too fast in the discussion, prepare to deal with contention and do not expect the other person to accept matters even when you are right

Write down reflections on how things went and share the learning

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By putting down these thoughts, it has struck me that one of my development needs is dealing with younger colleagues and I will develop this theme in my next piece.

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