



Career Corner

Handling Conflict Diplomatically

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Introduction

When information security professionals think of ways to further their careers, their first thoughts usually turn to improving their technical skills. I usually recommend a different approach and advise them on the importance of differentiating themselves in non-technical ways. One of the main differentiators that I emphasize is diplomacy. The ability to socialize an idea or program has become one of the most important characteristics of a successful security professional. Every good security practitioner at one point in their career (some earlier than others) begins to recognize the benefits of being able to create a win-win situation for their clients, customers and team.

Security professionals are constantly put into difficult situations that require finessing a solution. Since our profession requires that you interface with so many different internal and external clients, you are bound to run into just about every type of personality. It's more than likely at some point you will have an argument over points of view with your team, boss or client. Security professionals are known for being passionate about their work, so the question is *how do you handle disagreements when they arise?*

It's an important question because if your passion escalates to a raging argument, not only will you fail to succeed in presenting your position, you risk tainting your reputation with that individual and possibly their whole team or department. You are a professional who needs to implement solutions through influence more often than through direct orders, so this is ground you can't afford to lose. So let's talk about a few tips to better approach conflict.


Five Steps to Better Diplomacy

1. Understand that there is a certain amount of respect that should be displayed with someone over a work-related issue. If you are feeling confrontational, **let your anger subside before you confront someone**. You need to be able to state your position succinctly and rationally. If you are polite and calm, the listener will more likely focus on what you are saying than your angry or emotional demeanor. Not only will you be listened to, your message won't be dismissed as an irrational or emotional response.
2. You have two ears and one mouth for a reason. **Listen to what the other person has to say**. By giving the listener respect, it will give them the feeling that you are considerate of their opinion. Not only will they sense your interest in their point of view, others who may be participating in the conversation will be positively influenced by your behavior and listen more carefully to your point of view.
3. Edit, edit, edit. Whether this is verbal or written, please **learn to not just convey your immediate reaction**. Recently a client phoned me

enraged about a conversation he had with his boss. He relayed the conversation and read the subsequent e-mail that followed it. As he told me his reaction, I asked him to please send me his e-mail response before he sent it to his boss. When I received his response, I phoned him and asked, "What are you trying to accomplish?" The response was very emotional, lacked facts, and in the end didn't really accomplish anything. I think it was the type of response that most people would initially write. I edited the response and sent it back for his approval. He showed it to the VP of human resources before sending it to his boss and was complimented on the professional manner in which he handled the situation. The differentiating characteristic here is the ability to realize that messages need to be edited before they are sent when dealing with sensitive or heated matters. Much is to be gained by taking the higher road. It has become more the exception than the norm, and it is recognized as a characteristic of a successful team player or executive.

4. **Pick your battles**. Know when and where to fight. As a security professional, if we cry wolf all of the time, eventually no one will listen at all. Your objective is to no longer say no, but to craft creative solutions that get everyone to yes. If you complain about every small issue, you are going to be viewed as uncooperative and are going to be purposely excluded rather than welcomed as part of the team meetings. Your job is hard enough, you need to recognize that some battles can never be won. Make sure that you adequately convey the risk of a decision to the appropriate level of management and document your findings and results.
5. **Recognize that some battles can't be fought alone**. There are some disagreements that will either require escalation to management or the involvement of other departments. This fact validates the importance of building relationships outside of your particular team with lines of business, human resources, risk management, legal, audit, compliance and marketing to name a few. Often the facts that you have gathered may not be enough to sway the opinions of others. Professionals from these other areas may bring a broader perspective to championing your point of view to your adversary.

Conclusion

Although we are often required to be diplomats, we are never given diplomatic immunity. In other words, your behavior in stressful situations both proceeds and follows you internally and externally throughout the course of your career. It will be a determining factor in your promotions, raises, and job changes, so think twice before you respond! 

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