

-The following article was written by a Rear Commodore in the Ninth District and published in that district's news magazine "Currents" in 2005. The article seems relevant to all of us associated with the US Coast Guard Auxiliary. I am posting this article with permission from the author, Michael Merriman.-

On Disagreeing

By Rear Commodore-South, Michael Merriman, D9

I'll bet we all have disagreements in our Auxiliary lives. Any takers?
We have plenty to disagree about:

- the recent changes in our favorite program made it too easy, or too hard,
- those new leaders the "others" elected don't know what they are talking about,
- we shouldn't "waste" our money on the other person's program; we should "invest" it on mine.

Of course I'm being a bit tongue-in-cheek. To us, our disagreements are meaningful and important; why else would we send so much time and energy on them?

Disagreeing is healthy! Without it how would new ideas get the cleansing and refinement that make for better decisions? How would imperfect programs be shaped and improved as they mature?

So why am I wasting this ink on the subject? Because I believe it's vitally important to the organization and us individually, that we learn how to disagree without being disagreeable. I suspect that ineffective disagreement can be one of the more corrosive forces our organization encounters, but it doesn't need to be.

A disagreement becomes ineffective when it shifts from focus on the idea to the person. I've seen members get up and walk out of meetings, rather than stay and listen to debates that descended into personal attacks. I've talked to others who have resigned, mentally or physically, after a member has used a public forum to berate others. Thankfully this does not happen often. Who needs it?

By taking just a few simple actions we can enjoy the benefits of effective disagreement and avoid the nearby shoals.

- In meetings, address arguments on a motion to the chair – never to another member. This forces you to focus on the point.

- "Sell" ideas on their positive merit rather than impugning the character of those with other opinions.
- Avoid being negative in public. In public means in email as well as in meetings.
- Be judicious in the use of "cc" or "bcc" or "Reply to All" in email, especially when expressing a disagreement.
- After composing a blistering letter or email message, save it. Read it the next day and decide if you really want to send it.
- Praise in public, reprimand in private!

Above all, treat others with respect! As stated in Admiral Loy's book, *Character in Action*, "It facilitates and encourages open lines of communication..."

I hope we all bear in mind that we may sometimes slip and disagree "ineffectively" when making a passionate case. We should be forgiving. Most Auxiliaries are passionate about their missions and care very deeply. That's why they give so willingly of their time, energy and resources. Though we should constantly attempt to improve we shouldn't be surprised when that passion sometimes is inappropriately expressed as it cannot always be turned on and off like a spigot.