

# "The Rule of Five:"

## Avoiding Well-Intentioned Disagreements

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Too often, a discussion that started out with one person trying to help another, ends with someone throwing up his or her hands in frustration, storming out of the room, shouting, "This is the thanks I get? I was only trying to be helpful! Just forget I said anything!"

It is important to remember that although the intention was positive, if the person receiving that intent does not want help, she will feel pressured, unintelligent, and defensive. Those are perfect ingredients for the beginning of an argument.

### A simple method to avoid well intentioned disagreements

To see how "The Rule of Five" works, we first have to understand the dynamics of a disagreement. Let's walk through a scenario to see how two cooperative folks can escalate a daily irritation into a full-blown argument.

Suzanne comes home from a long, exasperating, day at work. She's emotionally drained, physically tired, and wants nothing more than to climb into a hot bath.

Robert, her loving husband, greets her with a hug and says, "Hi Sweetie, looks like you've had a rough day. What's up?"

Suzanne wearily replies as she plops her purse on the couch, "I had a miserable day. Everyone seemed to get hit with the cranky beam, agenda packets are a mess, and the city manager and I got in a disagreement when I was leaving."

Robert, wanting to improve the lot of his loving partner, suggests, "Did you talk it out?"

"No, it was already 5:00. I just wanted to get home," she responds.

"You know," says Robert, "He really needs to know your side."

"I know," she says, "I'll tell him tomorrow. I really don't want to think about it right now."

"Isn't he there until 6:00? You could call him now."

"Yes, he is. I just don't want to deal with it."

Robert, concerned his wife is avoiding the issue, presses onward, "Are you sure that's wise? You want to make sure your reputation stays intact."

"I know," she responds, "But it can wait until tomorrow. An extra hour is no big thing."

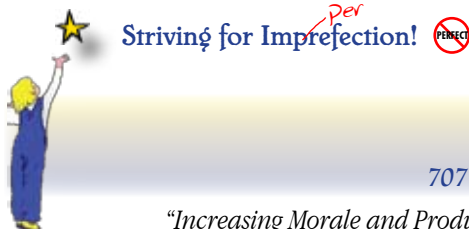
"I disagree," he says. "I find that if I'm in a bind, it's always best to fix it immediately. Here, hand me the phone, I'll call him for you."

"Robert, I appreciate your help; but don't want to talk to him right now. Just let me relax, OK?"

"Tell you what, you call him. I'll make dinner and then we can both unwind. How about that?"

Raising her voice, Suzanne responds, "I'm a grown woman! I know what to do. I'll take care of it tomorrow! Just leave me alone for a few moments, OK?"

Robert, hurt and angry, replies to the back of Suzanne's head as she's exiting the room, "Wow, see if I try and be supportive again!" He storms into the living room, clicks on the TV and



SCOTT "Q" MARCUS

707.442.6243 • [scottq@scottqmarcus.com](mailto:scottq@scottqmarcus.com) • [www.scottqmarcus.com](http://www.scottqmarcus.com)

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mopes. Suzanne goes to the bedroom and collapses on to the bed – alone. Despite Robert’s sincere desire to help create a warm environment, this night ends in a chilly frost, with both parties angry and isolated.

## What went wrong?

The first problem is Suzanne was not “broken.” She made decisions she felt were appropriate and didn’t feel the need to adjust. Robert, however, did not like to see his wife in pain, and wanted to help. When Suzanne’s ideas clashed with Robert’s intentions, the result was an explosion. Balance must be attained.

## How to use the Rule of Five

Consider each statement, question, or comment to count as **one transaction**. The two keys to a peaceful, yet still supportive, exchange are:

- 1) Stop before you get to five transactions
- 2) Ask questions before volunteering solutions
- 3) Leave the door open for further communication

Let’s visit Robert and Suzanne again, and see how the “Rule of Five” helps. The situation begins as before but this time, Robert asks, “Anything I can do to help?” (*Note: this is the first transaction. He has asked to help her. He is not volunteering advice.*)

Suzanne replies, “No, I just want to be left alone.” (*That’s the second transaction.*)

Robert understands that sometimes people say they don’t want help because they don’t want to be a burden, or they’re not really sure you want to help. Therefore, he asks one more time, “You sure? I’d be glad to help if you need anything.” (*That is now the third transaction. Basically, he just restated what he did before. He is not putting pressure on Suzanne, just letting her know that he was sincere. By restating the question, she might also hear it differently and it gives her time to reconsider — should she want to.*)

Suzanne replies with *transaction number four*, “No, I’ve got it worked out. I’m going to take a bath.”

**Here is where the Rule of 5 shows its power.** If Robert engages in transaction number five by offering assistance yet again, he is now being pushy. It is no longer about him trying to be helpful; it is now about him subconsciously telling her she’s not smart enough to do it on her own. It’s also becomes more about him trying to avoid his own discomfort of her raw feelings. However, he doesn’t want to see her in pain. Therefore, he doesn’t just walk away. Instead, he closes with, “OK. I’m here if you need me. Let me know if I can do anything for you.”

Robert continues about his evening or changes the subject (possibly with a hug for his wife). Suzanne gets the time to unwind and bring up the subject later (if she so chooses). Bottom line, both people get a more peaceful evening and the relationship is more balanced.

Before you try and “fix” something that does not need fixing, remember the old joke:

“How many boy scouts did it take to help the old lady across the street?”

“Ten — she didn’t want to go.”

About the writer:

**Scott “Q” Marcus refers to himself as a “THINspirational Speaker and Recovering Perfectionist”** He lost 70 pounds in 1994 and now uses the lessons he learned to help individuals and organizations playfully increase morale, improve communication, and heighten productivity during challenging times. He is a syndicated columnist, award-winning speaker, and the author of three books. He has spoken to associations and individuals across the country. This article can be downloaded from [www.scottqmarcus.com/articles.html](http://www.scottqmarcus.com/articles.html) and he can be contacted for consulting or speaking at [scottq@ScottQMarcus.com](mailto:scottq@ScottQMarcus.com) or 707.442.6243