

On the Edge

Timely, Thoughtful and Always Candid

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The Art of Being Wrong

Every day brings a myriad of opportunities to increase our awareness, wisdom and, ultimately, effectiveness. The problem is that most of us walk right past these opportunities because of a little glitch in our mental "software."

Years ago, a friend of mine, who is a behavioral psychologist, shared an insight that has stuck with me. While presenting to a local group of Training and Organizational Development professionals, he asked a very simple question: *"What is the strongest need that human beings consistently act upon?"* Most people in the audience (myself included) volunteered their recollections of Abraham Maslow and his Hierarchy of Needs theory. According to Maslow, our strongest needs were survival-related - food, shelter and physical safety. *"That is an interesting model in theory,"* acknowledged my friend, *"but not very close to observable behavior patterns."* He went on to say, *"The strongest need that most human beings act upon consistently is the need to be right."* The room was dead silent as the "a-ha" set in.

As we further explored the subject, his perspective made more and more sense. Each of us wake up in the morning with our own version of "truth and reality" preprogrammed into our brains. It's a composite of our values, social conditioning, interpretation of past experiences, and expectations of future events. Here's the glitch: as we begin the new day's activities, we don't typically go into it with an open mind and the intent to take in new information objectively. Instead, we (subconsciously, in most cases) scan our environments and seek out specific information that supports and solidifies what we already think and believe! This process, repeated day after day, makes us neither wiser nor more effective! *"The solution,"* my friend suggested, *"is to teach ourselves to be wrong more often."*

Over the next several years, my fascination with this notion led me to become a student of how our brains work and seek out the "patches" (isn't that what Microsoft calls them?) to the flaws in our mental operating systems. Here are a few thoughts I've come up with for "being wrong the right way".

1. Try to separate your fact base from your belief base, and treat the two accordingly. We're each entitled to our own opinions and beliefs, but we are not entitled to treat them as universal truths applicable to everyone else or treat others poorly who may not share them.
2. Acknowledge that sometimes you just don't understand others' points of view. It doesn't make them wrong...it just means you don't get them (yet), appreciate or agree with them.
3. Even if you believe (or believe in) something with all your heart, it doesn't make you right. At best, it makes you strong in your convictions. At worst, it makes you bull-headed, abrasive and potentially disrespectful.
4. Always leave the door open for change. Even if you believe [in] something very strongly, be willing to listen to counterpoints and evidence to the contrary. Even if you don't change your opinion, you'll benefit from an expanded awareness of how others see things. It's this willingness to take in and consider conflicting perspectives that leads not only to greater wisdom, but greater civility in our relationships.

5. When talking about controversial subjects or topics, leave the word "but" (and all of its derivatives) out of your vocabulary. "But" negates others' perspectives and can communicate a disregard for their opinions. Instead, try using valuing words/phrases such as "and" or "at the same time," which convey respect for others' views while leaving the door open for you to share your own opinions.

6. Above all else, practice empathy. Seek first to understand...and then to be understood.

The ability to "be wrong" requires constant attention and work. In fact, my wife will likely double over with laughter when she learns that I'm even offering my two cents on this topic. She's stated many times over the course of our marriage that she suspects the entire Meshanko clan is genetically incapable of acknowledging that we're ever wrong. That is, of course, absurd. Still, I usually say, "*You're right, dear*". No matter how right I am, I've learned that occasional acquiescence is crucial to domestic tranquility. It's not impossible – just unwise – to be an "expert" under your own roof!

- *Paul Meshanko*

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