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What's Wrong With Being Right?

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By
Jack Lerner and Jay Cherney

Introduction

We enter most conversations hoping to promote an idea or point of view. We've thought through our position and have confidence in the good it will produce. Yet all too often-- especially when we hit opposition--being so strongly convinced ends up undercutting our goals. In short, there's something wrong with being right.

The Problem

One challenge with being right resides in the certainty it produces. As Bruce Patton and colleagues in their book, *Managing Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss what Matters Most*, points out: when a conversation becomes stuck we don't see ourselves as the problem because what we are saying makes sense. What causes the mischief is our difficulty seeing that what the other person is saying also makes equally good sense to them.

Sure, when in a charitable mood we'll sometimes concede "of course there are two sides to every

story" or, "everyone's entitled to their own opinion". But more often than not, deep inside, we think "since I'm right, they're the problem"...and the other thinks the same. Insisting we are right only fuels this great divide.

When we hear we're wrong about our idea, position, or point of view we often hear a deeper message about our competence, or even our character. We then revert to defensiveness, as we fight to boost ourselves back up to win the next point. And so the tennis match unfolds: I slam the ball in your court and you do likewise in return. This makes for good tennis but not for great collaborative outcomes. The communication process becomes one of making statements at each other and rarely listening to what the other party is saying. The idea of a two way problem solving conversation vanishes to one of making our point.

Patton and other experts in this arena would clearly NOT advocate that you weaken your confidence. What they do advocate is staying strong about your position AND shifting your mindset to be more curious and open to the other person's point of view. Arguing, or its polite equivalent, only gets in the way of our ability to notice or understand the differences in how we construct our points of view. After all, when we really think about it, it's usually not about who's right or wrong. Our communication difficulties mostly always are a function of differing perceptions, interpretations and values. Patton asks us to think about this in the context of contractual agreements and negotiations. These

discussions are often so difficult because of the varying interpretations of what a contract means, not what it actually says!

So what to do?

So, what to do? The key is to shift from advocating to inquiring. Be curious about their story, their perspective. Assume there are advantages and disadvantages to both ideas, and be willing to explore all the pros and cons.

The challenge is to understand why they feel they are right. What is motivating them? How does their idea actually make good sense? This stance involves a shift toward open ended questions, not just restatements of your position. Try to learn how they came to their point of view. And even if you think their perspective is woefully out of whack, acknowledge (paraphrase with sincerity) that they have a right to think and feel the way they do. The bottom line is that most of us won't change our thinking unless or until we feel we're understood.

We actually have the greatest leverage to influence and persuade when the other person feels accepted and appreciated. In this climate defenses come down. Your 'adversary' becomes more inclined to reciprocate your authentic attempt to understand and appreciate his position, with its pros and cons. When such a positive cycle of openness and exploration gains momentum, you're moving toward real collaboration. This is how people find productive common ground and mutually useful solutions.

It all begins when someone stops being right and starts being curious. Being right may feel good at first, but it may not get you what you really want.

Conclusion

So as you enter a challenging conversation, consider sticking with these guidelines; they'll keep the exchange more productive.

- Stay curious about the other person's point of view
- Ask open-ended questions to learn more
- Talk less, listen more --- do not try to dominate the conversation
- Paraphrase key points to show the other person you understand
- Acknowledge the value of their position; set aside your focus on what's wrong about it
- Assume the other person has positive intentions
- Be careful about your impulse to criticize, judge or blame
- Be tough on the other person's ideas but easy on them as a person
- Be willing to be influenced by the other person

Difficult conversations are never easy. However, by setting aside the need to be right and the negative behaviors it can lead to, we can increase the potential for a successful outcome.

Jack Lerner is a leadership development consultant and coach. Jay Cherney is a clinical psychologist and coach who specializes in strengths-based relationship building. Jack and Jay conduct our Difficult Conversations program. Both can be reached through our office. Our e-mail address is ira@asherman.com or by phone at 212.243.0782.

Upcoming Articles

In the coming months Ira will have two articles published. In August the RAPS Journal, Regulatory Affairs Focus will feature the second of his two articles on reinforcing training. Also in August the DIA Global Forum will feature an article Ira wrote with Cass Bing of ITAP on culture and team effectiveness.

Ira's most recent article, written with Barry Sagotsky, and titled, Trust Based Influence and the Sponsor/CRO Relationship, can be downloaded from our website. The address is <http://www.asherman.com/downloads/article-tbi-scro.pdf>.

Materials

Regulatory Affairs Assessment

We have recently completed the beta testing of our new Regulatory Affairs Assessment and it is now available for you review. The survey is designed to obtain feedback for your regulatory department from co-workers. The address is <http://www.asherman.com/products-ra-assessment.htm>.

Electronic Planning Workbook

Designed to ensure your success as a negotiator, the workbook gives you a consistent methodology for all your negotiation planning. The address is <http://www.asherman.com/products-ra-assessment.htm>.

To obtain all of the earlier newsletters and our newest products, go to our website at www.asherman.com