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Never Say, "You're Wrong"

The best solution, wisest decision, and brightest idea nearly always exist outside of what one party brings to the table. Yet we find it quite easy to declare another person wrong, often before we've taken the time to consider what he or she is saying.

Even when we believe another is wrong, there is only one way to guarantee an unenviable end to an interaction and all chance of connection or meaningful collaboration, and that is to tell the other person we think so.

"Those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it. Those who learn the wrong lessons from the past may be equally doomed," writes Harvard Business School professor and coauthor of *Negotiation Genius,* Deepak Malhotra, in the opening of a Forbes.com article comparing the 2011 NFL revenue share dispute with a similar dispute between the owners and players of the National Hockey League in 2004–5.

In both disputes, the owners, concerned about rising costs, asked the players to accept a smaller share of league revenues. In both disputes, the players rejected the owners' request and asked to see proof of the rising costs. In both disputes, the owners initially refused to substantiate their claims. In the NHL the situation turned dire because neither would back down. "Accusations of greed were rampant," explains Malhotra. "Unable to bridge the divide even months after the collective bargaining agreement . . . had expired, the NHL eventually canceled the season. Two billion dollars in revenues were lost."

Was the result a foregone conclusion? According to Malhotra, it was avoidable if only the sides had understood the basic human relations problem at the heart of the matter. "Both sides lost the season because the owners refused to acknowledge that players had legitimate concerns. By seeing them as greedy rather than mistrusting, the owners adopted the wrong strategy—intransigence rather than transparency—for too long."

The dispute fell into the trap of "I'm right, you're wrong" because neither would consider the alternative: that perhaps both were right. There is a critical lesson here. "Negotiations become more productive," concludes Malhotra, "when each party acknowledges that the other may have legitimate concerns. In the NFL dispute, both the owners and the players need to bring a more nuanced perspective to the bargaining table—or fans across America may be doing something other than watching pro football games next fall."[1]

Nuance, or subtle difference, is a critical concept to remember in the midst of disagreement. In most disputes, our differences with others are far subtler than we allow ourselves to see. We so easily treat dissonance like a chasm that cannot be crossed—the only resolution being one party taking a dive (or being shoved) off the cliff, so that only one party remains. It's far from the truth. "Friendship that insists upon agreement on all matters is not worth the name," exhorted Mahatma Gandhi. "Friendship to be real must ever sustain the weight of honest differences, however sharp they be."[2] The truth is that disagreement is more often a small crack in the sidewalk that can easily be negotiated if we come to the discussion table with a more open mind.

"We talk because we know something," explained corporate behavioral specialist Esther Jeles in a recent interview. "Or we think we know something. Or, in the workplace, because there is an expectation that we 'should' know something."[3] This expectation of knowledge tends to work against us in interactions because it closes off our minds to the possibilities that exist outside the knowledge we bring to the table. We enter interactions with corroboration in mind, and if that corroboration does not come, we spend the remainder of the interaction attempting to either rebut the other's assessment or rebuke the other's right to make an assessment in the first place. The result is that collaboration—or the possibility of it—is forfeited. If that's your approach, you will rarely progress far in relationships.

All effective problem solving, collaboration, and dispute resolution, said Jeles, begins with an emptying of the mind—of what we know or what we think we should know.

"This can feel incredibly unnatural," she admitted, "because we have been trained to demonstrate what we think, to show our knowledge, our smarts—we think therefore we talk." Yet by approaching a conversation with a blank

slate, we take a humbler and more honest approach. We acknowledge the possibility that we may not know all the facts and that we may not in fact be the only one who is right. Better yet, we create the possibility for meaningful collaboration—the melting of thoughts, ideas, and experiences into something greater than the sum of two parties.

The notion that we might not be the only one who is right and that we may in fact also be wrong is of course nearly always the case, but we seem so averse to admitting it. Why is that?

More often than not it is because we value personal victory over collaborative possibility. Yet in doing so, we not only stunt the relationship, we also punt the probability of greater progress than we originally considered. We expect too little if in the midst of disagreement we only seek a winner.

Jeles shared the following story from her experience with a well-known media conglomerate whose swift response to a national disaster caused an aftermath of in-house conflict.

Her cell rang at midnight—it was the president of a media conglomerate that had retained her. The man needed Jeles to facilitate a meeting first thing in the morning to deal with an assembly line of catastrophes.

The president was referring to the Hurricane Katrina tragedy. In the wake of one of the United States' worst natural disasters, his company had swiftly deployed 90 percent of its employees to various regions of the Gulf Coast. No planning, no strategy, just some general instructions to come back with the important stories. Now, two weeks later, the teams had returned to the realities of resuming business in the severely disjointed aftermath.

"I have four production teams fighting about whose coverage should take priority," the president explained. "I have legal fighting with production about waiting for proper vetting. And I have accounting fighting with everyone about divvying up the huge expense of the whole thing." He paused briefly, then went on to tell her how much it had cost: "Six times more than any previous production."

Jeles's role, said the president, was to meet with all the bickering leadership teams and help them talk it out.

Jeles knew precisely what to do.

The next morning, as she sat in the auditorium where the meeting was to be held, she watched a familiar sight: the executives and their senior staff each entered the auditorium metaphorically carrying a case—the case they would state to win the dispute. As they settled into their seats, she jumped in with an invitation.

"I would like everyone to take a moment and ask yourself this question: 'What could I have done differently during this assignment that would have helped the other departments succeed?'"

In her head, Jeles says, she could hear a series of thuds as the talking heads dropped their verbal cases to the floor. Ears then perked up around the room as, one by one, the team leaders shared their "in the future we could . . ." thoughts.

The CFO began by suggesting that his accounting and production teams could lay out a preliminary budget for projects.

"We don't have time," the executive vice president of production barked back, "for sitting around and making budgets when a story is breaking."

Jeles intervened with a question: "Can you see why accounting is suggesting this practice?"

"So we don't overspend," the executive vice president replied.

"Accounting," Jeles added, "has an imperative function for the survival of this company, equally as important as production." She then asked the chief financial officer and the executive vice president of production, "Could your two departments collaborate on creating a preliminary budget for weekly assignments and a breaking news budget with moving caps based on crisis proportions?"

Both nodded. The mediation moved on.

The company's chief counsel suggested legal could compose a "most common vetting problems" document so production would know beforehand how to avoid long vetting processes.

Jeles looked at the executive vice president, who was nodding. "That would be very helpful," she agreed.

"Done," replied the chief counsel.

The meeting continued in this manner, even going so far as to roll out the specifics of suggested items including budgets and documents. Within thirty

minutes, everyone in the room was in agreement about the solutions. The meeting was formally adjourned, and it was then that perhaps the most surprising thing of all happened: many executives and their staff stayed behind to capitalize on the collaboration momentum.

As Jeles picked up her bag to leave, the president approached. "In twenty-five years," he asserted, "I have never attended a meeting where there were more people listening than talking."

In the spirit of all great artisans who begin with only a blank page, white canvas, or lump of clay, we must enter all disputes with a mind open to what more we might discover and produce together. Only then can our true interpersonal potential be tapped.

On June 26, 2000, in the White House's East Room, where Teddy Roosevelt used to box, where Amy Carter had her high school prom, and where Lewis and Clark once camped in their tents, President Bill Clinton announced the completion of the first survey of the entire human genome. "Humankind is on the verge of gaining immense, new power to heal," he remarked.[4]

Next to him stood Dr. Francis Collins, noted geneticist and the head of the Human Genome Project. For seven years he had led an international team of more than a thousand scientists in what *Time* journalist J. Madeleine Nash called "the challenge of pulling off a technological tour de force that many ranked alongside splitting the atom and landing men on the moon. 'There is only one human genome project, and it will happen only once,' Collins said at the time. 'The chance to stand at the helm of that project and put my own personal stamp on it is more than I could imagine.' "[5]

That Collins had to do it while competing against a former colleague made it all the more interesting.

In May 1998, five years after Collins agreed to helm the project, Craig Venter, a passionate NIH biologist who was among the countless scientists dedicated to harnessing genomes to cure diseases, announced he was founding a company to scoop Collins's project by four years.

The "race" between Collins and Venter made for great press. Central to ongoing commentary were the two men's very different personalities—one brash, one reserved. And Collins, the reserved one, had little choice but to

compete. Doing so meant getting scientists from six countries, numerous government agencies, and many more numerous university labs to work together for a common interest rather than individual glory.

So it was even more remarkable that in the East Room that day Francis Collins introduced Craig Venter this way: "Articulate, provocative and never complacent, he has ushered in a new way of thinking about biology. . . . It is an honor and a pleasure to invite him to tell you about this landmark achievement."

Collins chose a path of cooperation and partnership and resisted the temptation to proclaim Venter wrong. Ultimately, he merely saw him as different. But different didn't have to mean opposed. While Collins admits the two are "different people . . . wired in a different way," *Time*'s Nash points out, "Collins now says that he considers Venter to have 'been a stimulant in a very positive way.'"

At the heart of the assertion that others are wrong is actually an unspoken admittance that we don't want to be rejected. It is in the spirit of not wanting to be wrong ourselves that we project that role on others. If not for a pointed patent leather reminder, Dale Carnegie himself would have fallen prey to this unenviable reaction.

Shortly after the close of World War I, he was the business manager for Sir Ross Smith. During the war, Sir Ross had been the Australian ace out in Palestine; shortly after peace was declared, he astonished the world by flying halfway around it in thirty days. No such feat had ever been attempted before. It created a tremendous sensation. The Australian government awarded him fifty thousand dollars, the king of England knighted him, and for a while he was the talk of the global town.

Carnegie was attending a banquet one night given in Sir Ross's honor, and during the dinner, the man sitting next to him told a humorous story that hinged on the quotation "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will."

The raconteur mentioned that the quotation was from the Bible. He was wrong, and Carnegie knew it positively. By his own admission, he appointed himself as an unsolicited and unwelcome committee of one to correct the storyteller.

The other man stuck to his guns. From Shakespeare? Absurd! That quotation was from the Bible. And the man knew it.

Frank Gammond, an old friend of Carnegie's, was seated to his left. Gammond had devoted years to the study of Shakespeare. So the storyteller and Carnegie agreed to submit the question to the expert.

Mr. Gammond listened, kicked Carnegie under the table, and then said, "Dale, you are wrong. The gentleman is right. It is from the Bible."

On their way home that night, Carnegie said to Mr. Gammond, "Frank, you knew that quotation was from Shakespeare."

"Yes, of course," he replied, "Hamlet, act five, scene two. But we were guests at a festive occasion, my dear Dale. Why prove to a man he is wrong? Is that going to make him like you? Why not let him save his face? He didn't ask for your opinion. He didn't want it. Always avoid the acute angle."

It taught Carnegie a lesson he never forgot.

Telling people they are wrong will only earn you enemies. Few people respond logically when they are told they are wrong; most respond emotionally and defensively because you are questioning their judgment. You shouldn't just avoid the words "You're wrong." You can tell people they are wrong by a look or an intonation or a gesture, so you must guard against showing judgment in all of the ways that you communicate. And if you are going to prove anything, don't let anybody know it.

It is easy to allow a certain tone to creep into our online communication, a tone that tells another person that we believe he or she is wrong. Sometimes we don't even realize the tone is there until we read what we've written sometime later. We believe we are being diplomatic, but each word, presented in absence of expression or a soft tone of voice, is usually a condemnation. This is one of the reasons settling disputes is best accomplished in person.

Instead of presenting a truncated argument through email, IM, or Twitter, create a more respectful, conciliatory environment for conversation. Then offer your point with an open mind. While you in fact might be right and the other person wrong, there is no sense in denting a person's ego or permanently damaging a relationship. If you remember those who obstinately insisted you were wrong, you can be certain others will remember you in that same negative

light if you choose to turn an interaction into an opportunity to teach a lesson instead of a chance to strengthen a relationship.

Always default to diplomacy. Admit that you may be wrong. Concede that the other person may be right. Be agreeable. Ask questions. And above all, consider the situation from the other's perspective and show that person respect.

Such a humble approach leads to unexpected relationships, unexpected collaboration, and unexpected results.