

When Being Right Ain't Right

By George E. Gercken, Ph.D.

As human beings, we have egos that cause us to want to be viewed favorably. Consequently, we have a sizable concern with being correct, or at least not being viewed as incorrect. We engage in stories that make us appear right and others wrong. As we do this, we con ourselves and turn away from the truth. Our ability to see things accurately is compromised. We depict those who do not agree with us as somehow deficient and mistaken in their beliefs.

There is no easy way to avoid these distortions. Having the discipline to ask questions drives a more accurate understanding of the other person and situation. The main question to ask is, "What is going on here?" By stepping back and not accepting our initial narrative, we can ask practical and pertinent questions. This is a subset of the concept of **DDD**, or **Don't Deny Data**. The denial, in this case, is the distortion of data that we engage in to protect our egos. But when we treat the problem as if a third party has stepped in, we depersonalize it and give ourselves an emotional distance. This capacity to step back and reflect, while not damning ourselves or projecting our issues onto others, is a healthy and productive way to avoid these distortions.

The projecting thing is constantly done these days within the political arena. They are the bad guys and we are the good ones, which means they need to change to accept our "truth." And if they are unwilling to buy into our ownership of the "truth," then they are absolutely wrong and need to be punished to get the message.

In the book *The True Believer*, author and social philosopher Eric Hoffer speaks about radical individuals who can only accept their own "truths." Everyone else is wrong and somehow alien. Those who disagree need to be dealt with and sometimes eliminated. For if I own the "truth," then inevitably you are wrong, perhaps even diseased and requiring removal from the body politic.

Though "When Being Right Ain't Right" has to do with factual correctness, it is about cohabitating in a democracy. That is the space where different ideas and views are not only tolerated but encouraged. But, if I already own the "truth," why would I be required to take in different views? The simple answer is that I am human and not a machine. I am amazingly fallible. I have the capacity to spin and distort data, even when I wish to be as accurate as possible. So without other input to impact and calibrate my thinking, I will go on believing that I am correct, even when I am factually and perhaps dangerously wrong.

What does it mean when I believe I am really right and you are really wrong? Do I then impose my rightness on you, regardless of your wrongness? That is an age-old issue in coaching. Quite often, individuals want a co-conspirator, not someone who will disagree with them. They want a sort of absolution for their behavior, not facing up to the requirement to think and act more humbly and effectively.

Success begins when you listen to the other person to achieve a fuller understanding of their ideas and needs. Two things happen when you do this. First, you find out what their thoughts are and begin to manage your distortions. Second, listening to the other person respectfully and wholeheartedly forms an emotional connection where you can then influence their thinking . . . and perhaps what you believe to be your own rightness.

Very early in my career, an old-timer told me that our clients teach us everything we know. But as a newly minted Ph.D., I knew everything that mattered. My initial encounters with engineers and individuals from other countries quickly dashed my rightness, just as my anxiety levels skyrocketed. In truth, I did not know much of anything about this world. Groping around in semidarkness, trying to find a way forward, was all I could do.

Our clients taught me to recognize what I did not know. They taught me to ask questions and look for the answer to "What is going on here?" They taught me to know "When Being Right Ain't Right." For when you are certain that you are right, that is the time to step back, ask questions and gather more data. With a bit of reflection, you may find something more valuable than being right, and that is a better way to understand and relate with others.