



Why We Feel So Right Doing the Wrong Thing (and what we can do about it)

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The election is over... sort of. But about half the voting populace is highly concerned that our country is moving in the wrong direction. Rather than resolve our differences, the election seems to have merely built the scaffolding for the next round of hyperpartisanship, incivility, and fear. Can we overcome this cycle of distrust and begin to reconcile our differences or are we locked into a predestined future of political strife and unrest? Fortunately, there is something we can do about it.

Be Skeptical, Not Cynical

When my colleague and I prepare students to meet with policymakers on Capitol Hill as part of their Washington Seminar course, we drum into their consciousness two interrelated ideas: Be skeptical, not cynical. Being skeptical allows room for intellectual curiosity, honest inquiry, critical thinking, and evidence-based approaches. Healthy skepticism encourages us to examine assumptions, including our own, and remain open to changing our minds when we are confronted with contrary facts. Training ourselves to test human assumptions rather than blindly follow them not only mediates truth, but can lead to greater understanding, innovation, and creativity.

Cynicism is qualitatively different from skepticism. To accept cynicism is to lose hope and become contemptuously distrustful of human nature; or worse, to become preoccupied with one's own interests and to disregard "accepted or appropriate standards in order to achieve them."¹ When we see the daily onslaught of grandstanding public officials or talking heads in the media, it is hard not to feel cynical – and we all go there at times.

When habitual cynicism takes hold it encourages a phenomenon known as detrimental motivated reasoning, which is the "tendency to find arguments in favor of conclusions we want to believe to be stronger than arguments for conclusions we do not want to believe."² We cease to be objective inquirers because we have already decided the truth. Hardcore cynics often become certain of their "rightness" but

intolerant of other people's ideas. This further undermines relationships with those who think differently from us. Ultimately, it becomes extremely difficult to heal divisions in our families, in our communities, and in our nation if we cannot shake off the chains of cynicism.

Admit We Could Be Wrong

Unfortunately, too often our latter day public leaders seem to embrace the misplaced belief that being wrong means there is something fundamentally wrong with us. As a result, we have little incentive to admit we are wrong and are usually rewarded for insisting that we are always right. To be right means *ipso facto* that we are virtuous and, perhaps more important, that we are not weak or fallible. Journalist and author Kathryn Schulz³ warns us about this mindset.

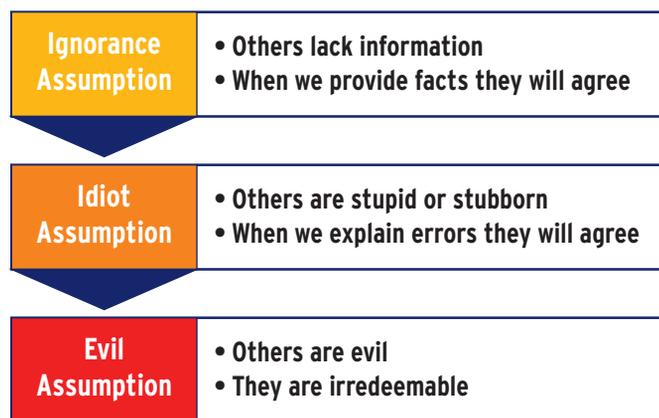
Trusting too much in the feeling of being on the correct side of anything can be very dangerous. This internal sense of rightness that we all experience so often is not a reliable guide to what is actually going on in the external world.

"And when we act like it is," Schulz continues, "and we stop entertaining the possibility that we could be wrong," we become like Wile E. Coyote who has run off the cliff chasing Roadrunner without a clue of his predicament until it is too late. Think of the Challenger shuttle tragedy in 1986 or the Deepwater Horizon BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010. The inability of a few individuals to admit they could be wrong – supported by a culture that discouraged fallibility – provided the conditions that led to these catastrophic failures. Our inability to be wrong also exacts a steep price on healthy interpersonal relationships by encouraging distrust and division while fueling the cynicism discussed earlier.

Schulz brilliantly captures this predicament by observing a "series of unfortunate assumptions" that we make when we are convinced we are right and bump up against people who disagree with us. First, we make an "ignorance assumption." We assume disagreement is due to others not knowing what we know. But when information and facts are provided and

people still disagree, we make the “idiot assumption.” Here, we believe people who disagree with us are not very bright or are too stubborn to yield to evidence and admit they are wrong. If we can repeat the facts, authoritatively make our case, and show them the error of their ways, they will undoubtedly agree with us. However, when others appear to be sufficiently intelligent but still choose to disagree with us, we quickly descend to the “evil assumption.” We assume that others know the truth and know we are right, but they choose to be manipulative due to hidden and questionable motives. Cynicism quickly follows and relationships become increasingly empty and transactional.

Schulz’s Series of Unfortunate Assumptions



It doesn’t take much before we begin demonizing others, which has dire consequences for community and democracy. According to political activist and law professor Roger Conner, eventually, people “start treating each other as not just wrong, but as wrongdoers, and then as enemies. . . . Once the trap is set, breaking the circle of blame is extraordinarily difficult.”⁴ In reality, Conner reminds us, “There are few profoundly evil people in the world, but if you think you’re surrounded by them, you probably need to change your own psyche.”⁵

Mending Fences

To bring about change, we must consider concrete actions that are proven to reduce motivated reasoning, counteract cynicism, and repair and restore trusting relationships. The following list summarizes 10 actions drawn from social psychology and cognitive behavior literature.

Reducing Motivated Reasoning and Improving Relationships

1. Avoid rushed decision-making. If possible, slow down and reflect.
2. Consider multiple possibilities, especially tradeoffs, counterarguments, or reasons why you might be wrong. Invite others to walk this path.
3. When attempting to debunk, do not simply attack beliefs – provide a viable alternative.
4. When attempting to correct, don’t attack identity; allow people to save face.
5. Authentically engage people before decisions are made.
6. Spark genuine, non-hostile interaction among diverse individuals.
7. Support the expression of dissenting and minority views.
8. Create a climate where doubt and uncertainty are welcome and appropriate.
9. Encourage situations where people are accountable for their position; provide both the expectation and opportunity for them and explain it clearly.
10. Create opportunities for real relationships based on trust and respect.

Rather than elaborate on these suggestions, I would like to propose one concrete experiment with the goal of improving a specific relationship of your choice. I invite you to begin by reaching out to someone you know with a very different opinion from you about one or more issues. Feel free to tell them you are doing an experiment you read about in *The Municipality* (being “in” on the plan can help people drop their guard a bit). Transparently explain that your goal is to try and better understand where they are coming from, what they think about the issue, and why it matters to them. Next, commit yourself to this goal. Research shows that the simple act of listening to understand and acknowledging that you “see” the other person reduces defenses, builds trust, and opens people to new ideas. Come prepared with a list of basic questions designed to elicit their views, not to play “gotcha” or to impugn their facts or logic. Some examples include:

- Tell me how you feel about the topic.
- How did you come to your current beliefs or conclusions about the topic?
- Why is this topic important to you? (Or why not?)
- What is something you worry might happen if the topic is not addressed or resolved?
- Is there any information you wish you had that might clarify something about the topic?

The final part of the experiment is reflection. Depending on how the conversation goes this could be an internal self-reflection, a shared reflection with your partner, or some combination of both. If the experiment goes well and you think it is relevant, consider sharing something positive about the conversation. If you cannot think of anything positive about their viewpoint, maybe there is something positive about how they expressed it. Whatever you choose to say, be authentic. If appropriate, you might consider summarizing areas of common ground. If there is no common ground it is OK to point that out politely. But above all be careful to avoid correcting, critiquing, or moralizing about your partner's perspective. You might also ask your partner a reflective

question such as, "How did you feel sharing your perspective with me?"

There are some risks. You could end up talking with someone who rambles a lot and has a hard time keeping on topic. You could be legitimately offended by something the person says and feel unable listen because of emotional harm. Or, perhaps after hearing something, you might feel like you cannot bite your tongue any longer. Here is where some common sense and discretion comes in. You can end the conversation at any time and not feel guilty about it. Remember, this is an experiment. You can always pull the plug and claim that you reached the time limit.

An Experimental Conversation Guide

1. Initial inquiry

- Reach out to someone with whom you have political/issue differences.
- Explain that you are conducting an experiment designed to get people with different viewpoints talking to one another.
- Explain the purpose and goals of the conversation:
 - Listen carefully to their viewpoint.
 - Learn about their perspective and why it matters.
 - See if there is any common ground (optional).
- Choose a mutually agreed upon topic (have one or two in mind).

2. Prepare for the conversation

- Set a place and time for the conversation.
- Set a time limit.
- Create your list of questions (share if desired).
- Commit internally to the goals.

3. Hold the conversation

- Focus on listening to understand.

4. Politely conclude the conversation and thank your partner

5. Self-reflection

- What went well?
- Did you learn anything about yourself, the topic, or your partner?
- How did you feel about your partner as you listened to them?

6. Shared reflection (optional)

- If appropriate, share positive feelings you had while listening.
- If appropriate, ask your partner to share how they felt.
- If appropriate, share instances of common ground.

There is Hope

This experimental conversation is a point of departure, not an end. The intent is to create space to build or repair relationships with others who think differently by consciously valuing them as human beings. We can do this without sacrificing our core values and beliefs, and while still maintaining a healthy skepticism. We need to remind ourselves that most disagreements – even intense ones – are not representative of good versus evil. Despite our differences by choosing to build a bridge through respectful listening, we can begin to overcome cynicism and motivated reasoning, repair damaged relationships, and reimagine new ones. And

although we cannot undo the bitter experiences of the past, let us commit to not be prematurely disappointed with the future. As the beloved childhood poet, Shel Silverstein, reminds us:

Listen to the mustn'ts, child. Listen to the don'ts. Listen to the shouldn'ts, the impossibles, the won'ts. Listen to the never haves, then listen close to me... Anything can happen, child. Anything can be.

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NOTE: We are pleased to announce that the *Conflict Management* column will be published bimonthly, alternating with *For the Good of the Order*.

1. See Oxfordlanguages.oup.com.

2. Kunda, Z. (1990). "The case for motivated reasoning." *Psychological Bulletin*, 108 (3): 480-498. doi:10.1037/0033-2909.108.3.480

3. See Schulz, *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010).

4. Quoted in James Hoggan with Grania Litwin, *I'm Right and You're an Idiot: The Toxic State of Public Discourse and How to Clean It Up* (Canada: New Society Publishers, 2016), pp. 17-18.

5. Quoted in Hoggan, p. 17.