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# GETTING TO
# "WHAT'S RIGHT,"
# NOT "WHO'S RIGHT"

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There is a very, very good chance that our
understanding of gravity will not be the same in five
hundred years. In fact, that's the one arena where I
would think that most of our contemporary evidence
is circumstantial, and that the way we think about
gravity will be very different.
—Brian Greene, Ph.D., (chairman, World Science
Festival; professor, Columbia University)

The necessity of "being right"—often at the expense of someone else—creates all kinds of problems in the world, and it has for centuries. However, it seems like we've reached an epidemic stage at this point in the world where the need to "be right" no longer is just an annoying urge leading to debate, discussion, and maybe going home and being upset for a while. Instead, it's taking an ugly turn. It's been brewing for the last few years, especially coming to a head here in the United States with our national politics, our two-party system, and the resulting extremism shown on the nightly news.

What's the endgame for this trend? We'll lose our humanity. Even today, we're losing a sense that we're all in this together, that we share this little blue ball in the middle of space, and that we have some shared challenges as a species related to taking care of it. Rather than looking at "what's right" for us collectively, we are creating political infighting, greed, family dysfunction, and domestic terrorism. The debate over the words "climate change" astounds me. Why can't we just get to "what's right" without the need to focus on "who's right"? It isn't

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a political question; it's about Earth, and there's no Planet B. I frankly don't care about the disagreement concerning the causes of climate change. Let's get to the "what's right" question and start *doing* something about it!

We can't simply disagree any longer, it seems. *Someone* has to be right, and that means everyone else needs to be wrong. Want some examples? Think of white supremacists, the KKK, and neo-Nazis on the streets of Charlottesville, Virginia. Think of the shooting of a congressman and three others at a charity baseball team practice in Alexandria, Virginia. Both events should be unacceptable in our culture—and to nearly *everyone* they are. However, rather than looking at the subject from a viewpoint of "what can we do about it together", the debate has devolved into name-calling, finger-pointing, and messages of "I'm right; you're wrong." We criticize one person for not getting the message right about denouncing the event while we vilify others because of their inaction. We're damned if we do, damned if we don't—because we're putting our energy into the wrong things.

Let's do a little "what if" here for a moment. What if we took a countercultural approach to this whole subject? Let's get shifted around to think about the notion of *what's right.* In other words, let's look at the things that connect us as opposed to the things that separate us. Let's look at how we share common interests instead of where our positions need to be defended. Let's find places where we are similar as opposed to being dissimilar.

In her book *Anatomy of the Spirit*, author Caroline Myss challenges the reader to take the major faiths of the world and stack them up on top of one another. She asks us to look at what the followers of these faiths believe at their core, the things that those faiths really stand for. By stacking them all up like a layer cake, turning the whole thing on its side and looking through it, you discover that the core essence of all the major faiths in the world is very, very similar.

Yes, there's stuff on the outside, the fringes and so on, that we can debate, but the similarities outweigh the differences by a wide margin. One example? Virtually *every* culture, in every location across

the world, has some version of the Golden Rule. It's a basic truth for humanity. As the old saying goes, if it's true somewhere, it's true everywhere. No question we share far more similarities than differences.

How might this dynamic play out in business or organizational life?

I work as an organizational development consultant and find myself in countless meetings with leadership teams wrestling with strategy, culture, and operations. Recognizing the impact of ego, strong personalities, balance-of-power issues, and such things, I like to start each workshop with a series of "agreements together." (Note: Some may call them "ground rules," but I don't like the energy implied by the term "ground rules." I like the two words "agreements" and "together" because both words are positive, and they have an active choice implied in them—"we choose to agree, together.") You can find the entire list of agreements together, along with some description about them here (www. teamtipton.com/agreements-together), but the one I want to concentrate on is this one: "We'll take the situation seriously, but not ourselves. We'll focus on what's right, not who's right."

Because these groups tend to be made up of highly educated, successful, and really intelligent people, those people also tend to have strong personalities and sizable egos. In addition, they tend to come from professional disciplines such as engineering, law, medicine, and so on. But something is often missing from their training or experience. They usually just "assume" that they should be able to get along because, hey, they're professionals! In my experience, the more training someone has, the less often that person is actually well skilled in the art of human interaction. (OK, that's my bias, but it tends to be true!)

Anyway, here's how I start these meetings. I say, "Because we're going to take the situation seriously, but not ourselves, I need to say a few things. I don't really care about your education. I don't care about your position on the organization chart. I don't care how much money you make or how long you've worked here. Unless you're applying your skills, knowledge, and expertise to 'what's right,' it's irrelevant." Pause. I continue, "If any of you feel the need to 'be right'—particularly at someone else's

expense—I'll call you out. If you persist in your need to 'be right,' you and I will have a separate conversation in the hallway." Another pause.

I let it sink in and look from face to face around the room.

Generally, I get some stunned facial expressions that seem to say, "Well, this is going to be a different meeting!" or "This won't be the same as it's always been," or "Who asked *this* guy to lead the meeting?" That said, I have never had anyone outright challenge me, and I think the reason is that at some deep level most people hunger for the chance to have a meeting where there's no politicking, no positioning, and no "alpha dog" behaviors. Maybe it's because I'm six feet six inches in bare feet and have a deep voice. Maybe. But other members of my team have given the same message to leadership teams with similar results. The message gets received, and people agree to focus on what's right.

What happens next? In my experience, they consider someone else's perspective before defending their own. Even for a moment they tend to humanize the person with whom they're working, and

they're willing to see a different viewpoint and put their position to the side. Strong leaders operating from this perspective don't think less *of* themselves. They just think less *about* themselves. It's transformational all by itself.

## Questions, Insights, Implications

1. What evidence do you see that we have a worldwide epidemic of people needing to be right?
2. When have you seen challenges in your own life, community, and so on associated with "who's right" (wars, political infighting, greed, family divisions, terrorism)?
3. Can you envision what the results might be of setting expectations through "agreements together" before meetings start? Before decisions are made?

Again, reflect on these questions, and allow yourself to be wrong and to be open to new perspectives. By doing so, you'll likely find new insights in the most unexpected places.