

Why It's Smart to Share Your Ignorance



Humankind is forgetting how to disagree. I don't mean merely that our *manner* of disagreeing is becoming increasingly problematic (although it is). I mean that we have an even bigger problem: We don't know how to disagree anymore because *we don't know what we are thinking*.

On its face, this seems obviously false. After all, has there ever been a time in the world's history when people were more sure of their opinions?

But this is precisely the problem. Opinions are things no one should ever be sure of. They should be held the way one holds a tray from a dessert buffet—ready to be put down the moment one sees a better option. And yet it seems that we are becoming increasingly unable to do this. We become set in our opinions precisely because we have lost sight of the fact that they are merely opinions.

Three Types of Opinions

From one of my colleagues at Arbinger, I learned a most helpful way to think about my own views. The idea is that my views are of one of three types:

1. Things about which I have *thoughts*;
2. Things about which I have *opinions*; or
3. Things about which I have *convictions*.

I believe that our culture is suffering from what one might call “opinion creep”—the elevation of unsupported thoughts to the status of opinions and opinions to convictions. When we elevate our own views in these ways, we are being dishonest with ourselves and misleading to others. This sloppiness and arrogance of thought puts corporate results at risk, imperils family happiness, and turns our politics into a food fight of epic and tragic proportions.

We can learn how to disagree with others more productively only if we first evaluate and qualify our own thoughts. How can we do this?

Evaluating and Qualifying Our Own Thoughts

Here’s how my friend does it: In his communications, he is careful to categorize his views in one of the three ways listed above—as thoughts, opinions, or convictions.

For example, sometimes he’ll say, “I have some thoughts about that, but not yet an opinion.” By this he means that he is aware that he hasn’t thought enough about the issue, or researched it enough, or received the training one would need, to have thoughts that could be considered reasoned. He realizes that his views in such cases are as likely to be driven by personal bias as anything else and therefore may not be reliable. He is humble enough to admit this to himself and others.

Other times he’ll say, “I have an opinion about that, but not a conviction.” By this he means that although he has thought enough about the issue to have a reasoned opinion, he

recognizes either that the matter is something about which one cannot be certain or that he still has gaps in his understanding and that his position might be incorrect. He is honest enough to be clear about that with others.

On occasion, he'll say that he has a conviction about a certain point. When he says this, I know that he believes he has put in sufficient effort to understand an issue and that he is highly confident he has it right and that his view is not being unduly driven by bias. Because he is self-aware and honest about his views, when he says he has a conviction, I take note.

People can be mistaken, of course, even about their convictions. Nevertheless, I find my friend's way of categorizing the relative strength of his views to be incredibly helpful, and I have enough experience with this approach to believe that speaking and listening in this way would have a significant impact on the health and effectiveness of our communications at work, at home, in our communities, and in our politics.

For example, partners in a relationship who realize that many of the differences between them are merely differences of opinion are far less likely to get mired in conflict than are those who are convinced of the correctness of their own views.

Similarly, business people who remain aware of their own ignorance will seek help and answers that opinion-bound people feel neither the desire nor need to find.

Preventing Opinion Creep

When we are becoming "opinion creeps," we tend to have convictions about many things and to have opinions about almost everything else. We blind ourselves to the enormity of our ignorance.

How can we keep from doing this? How can we tell whether our opinions are *creeping*? We can check ourselves by paying attention to two things: how frequently we express a conviction, on the one hand, and how often we admit ignorance on the other. Too many convictions or too few realizations of ignorance may indicate that our opinions are creeping.

Interestingly, the more we become aware of and honest about our own ignorance, the more seriously others will consider what we have to say. That might seem backwards. But if you think about it, it makes sense. After all, no one likes a creep.