A Modest Proposal

We Live in a Time of Strong Opinions

The rise of the Internet has allowed everyone with a computer to give voice to their favorite strongly-held opinions in an open forum. As a result, "silos" of like-minded people form. Conversations in these silos strengthen each person's already strongly-held opinion. This can quickly lead to viewing anyone who holds a different opinion as wrong. So wrong, in fact, that we risk dismissing them as clearly stupid, even bad, people who are not even worthy of our attention.

Once created, these strongly-held opinions can have a negative effect on smooth working relationships. Teamwork and cooperation suffer. How can we untangle such an unproductive mess?

Opinions Based on Facts vs Opinions *Not* Based on Facts

An opinion based on facts is a personal conclusion about a subject that is based on some combination of what is known and verified about the subject (i.e., facts), observations and experiences that relate to the subject, and what other knowledgeable people say about the subject.

An opinion *not* based on facts is usually based on observations and experiences that relate to the subject, and on what other people have said about the subject. It may also be based on a limited number of facts that have been selected *because they seem to support the opinion that has already been reached.* The problem with this kind of opinion is that it tends to ignore any facts that disagree or dispute it.

"Fake" Facts

It has become acceptable lately, if we disagree with another's opinion or facts, to label them as "fake." As Daniel Patrick Moynihan, an American politician and diplomat, said, "Everyone is entitled to their own opinions, but they are not entitled to their own facts."

In this era of strongly-held opinions, we need to form opinions based on facts, and question opinions, our own and others', that lack facts as a base. We should ask ourselves, "Is my opinion based on what I *want* to be true, or on what a person that I admire says is true, or are there are facts that support it?"

Discomfort Is Not Necessarily a Bad Thing

It's much more comfortable to feel that you are right, without examining your conclusions, than it is to deal with the uncertainty of recognizing the complexity of difficult situations. The world, the ground that we walk on every day, *is* complex. Our understanding of it is a "map" that we create in our head to help us navigate that ground, but our "map" may not always reflect the ground's complexity.

And, when we automatically make decisions based on our "map," without checking on how well it matches the ground, the results can be counter-productive.

The Map and the Ground

There's an old saying among military tacticians, "If the map and the ground disagree, believe the ground." I have a friend who, back in the day before GPS, was trekking through some rough country. The only maps available were 50 years old. At one point, he came to a stream which, according to the map, was at the foot of a large mountain. However, when he looked up from the map, there was no mountain. Which should he have believed, the map or the ground?

Facts are pieces of knowledge or information about the world that are known to be true – that is, they are observable and verifiable. Facts are steadfast. They don't change because we disagree with them or wish they weren't so.

Test Your Opinion

There is an easy way to test the strength of your opinion on an issue. First, list the three reasons that you feel most strongly support your opinion. Then list three reasons that your opinion may be wrong or weaker than you thought. The result may make you uncomfortably aware that more fact-finding is needed.

Use Facts and Openness to Others' Ideas to Find Common Ground

We started out this discussion by observing that listening only to people in our "silos" can make it more difficult to work with people with whom we happen to disagree. This is as true for big, society-wide problems as it is in our work groups, families, and communities. It's essentially human to reach conclusions (opinions) about situations and problems, and it is also one of the blessings of the human condition that we can open our minds when we become aware of facts that challenge those opinions. This can lead to more collaboration and better outcomes for everyone.

First, get the facts.