

## Stop Arguing About Who's Right: *Explore Each Other's Stories*

Michael's version of the story is different from Jack's:

In the past couple of years I've really gone out of my way to try to help Jack out, and it seems one thing or another has always gone wrong. And instead of assuming that the client is always right, he argues with me! I just don't know how I can keep using him.

But what really made me angry was the way Jack was making excuses about the chart instead of just fixing it. He knew it wasn't up to professional standards. And the revenue graphs were the critical part of the financial presentation.

One of the hallmarks of the "What Happened?" Conversation is that people disagree. What's the best way to save for retirement? How much money should we put into advertising? Should the neighborhood boys let your daughter play stick ball? Is the brochure up to professional standards?

Disagreement is not a bad thing, nor does it necessarily lead to a difficult conversation. We disagree with people all the time, and often no one cares very much.

But other times, we care a lot. The disagreement seems at the heart of what is going wrong between us. They won't agree with what we want them to agree with and they won't do what we need them to do. Whether or not we end up getting our way, we are left feeling

frustrated, hurt, or misunderstood. And often the disagreement continues into the future, wreaking havoc whenever it raises its head.

When disagreement occurs, arguing may seem natural, even reasonable. But it's not helpful.

## Why We Argue, and Why It Doesn't Help

Think about your own difficult conversations in which there are important disagreements over what is really going on or what should be done. What's your explanation for what's causing the problem?

### We Think *They* Are the Problem

In a charitable mood, you may think, "Well, everyone has their opinion," or, "There are two sides to every story." But most of us don't really buy that. Deep down, we believe that the problem, put simply, is *them*.

- **They're selfish.** "My girlfriend won't go to a couples' counselor with me. She says it's a waste of money. I say it's important to me, but she doesn't care."
- **They're naive.** "My daughter's got these big ideas about going to New York and 'making it' in the theater. She just doesn't understand what she's up against."
- **They're controlling.** "We always do everything my boss's way. It drives me crazy, because he acts like his ideas are better than anyone else's, even when he doesn't know what he's talking about."
- **They're irrational.** "My Great Aunt Bertha sleeps on this sagging old mattress. She's got terrible back problems, but no matter what I say, she refuses to let me buy her a new mattress. Everyone

in the family tells me, 'Rory, Aunt Bertha is just crazy. You can't reason with her.' I guess it's true."

If this is what we're thinking, then it's not surprising that we end up arguing. Rory, for example, cares about her Aunt Bertha. She wants to help, and she has the capacity to help. So Rory does what we all do: If the other person is stubborn, we assert harder in an attempt to break through whatever is keeping them from seeing what is sensible. ("If you would just try a new mattress, you'd see how much more comfortable it is!")

If the other person is naive, we try to educate them about how life really is, and if they are being selfish or manipulative, we may try to be forthright and call them on it. We persist in the hope that what we say will eventually make a difference.

But instead, our persistence leads to arguments. And these arguments lead nowhere. Nothing gets settled. We each feel unheard or poorly treated. We're frustrated not only because the other person is being so unreasonable, but also because we feel powerless to do anything about it. And the constant arguing isn't doing the relationship any good.

Yet we're not sure what to do instead. We can't just pretend there is no disagreement, that it doesn't matter, or that it's all the same to us. It *does* matter, it's *not* all the same to us. That's why we feel so strongly about it in the first place. But if arguing leads us nowhere, what else can we do?

The first thing we should do is hear from Aunt Bertha.

### They Think *We* Are the Problem

Aunt Bertha would be the first to agree that her mattress is indeed old and battered. "It's the one I shared with my husband for forty years, and it makes me feel safe," she says. "There are so many other changes in my life, it's nice to have a little haven that stays the same." Keeping it also provides Bertha with a sense of control over her life. When she complains, it's not because she wants answers, it's because

she likes the connection she feels when she keeps people current on her daily comings and goings.

About Rory, Aunt Bertha has this to say: "I love her, but Rory can be a difficult person. She doesn't listen or care much about what other people think, and when I tell her that, she gets very angry and unpleasant." Rory thinks the problem is Aunt Bertha. Aunt Bertha, it seems, thinks the problem is Rory.

This raises an interesting question: Why is it always the *other* person who is naive or selfish or irrational or controlling? Why is it that we never think we are the problem? If you are having a difficult conversation, and someone asks why you disagree, how come you never say, "Because what I'm saying makes absolutely no sense"?

### We Each Make Sense in Our Story of What Happened

We don't see ourselves as the problem because, in fact, we aren't. What we are saying *does* make sense. What's often hard to see is that what the other person is saying *also* makes sense. Like Rory and Aunt Bertha, we each have different stories about what is going on in the world. In Rory's story, Rory's thoughts and actions are perfectly sensible. In Aunt Bertha's story, Aunt Bertha's thoughts and actions are equally sensible. But Rory is not just a character in her own story, she is also a visiting character in Aunt Bertha's story. And in Aunt Bertha's story, what Rory says seems pushy and insensitive. In Rory's story, what Aunt Bertha says sounds irrational.

In the normal course of things, we don't notice the ways in which our story of the world is different from other people's. But difficult conversations arise at precisely those points where important parts of our story collide with another person's story. We assume the collision is because of how the other person is; they assume it's because of how we are. But really the collision is a result of our stories simply being different, with neither of us realizing it. It's as if Princess Leia were trying to talk to Huck Finn. No wonder we end up arguing.

Cognitive dissonance

### Arguing Blocks Us from Exploring Each Other's Stories

But arguing is not only a *result* of our failure to see that we and the other person are in different stories — it is also part of the *cause*. Arguing inhibits our ability to learn how the other person sees the world. When we argue, we tend to trade conclusions — the "bottom line" of what we think: "Get a new mattress" versus "Stop trying to control me." "I'm going to New York to make it big" versus "You're naive." "Couples counseling is helpful" versus "Couples counseling is a waste of time."

But neither conclusion makes sense in the other person's story. So we each dismiss the other's argument. Rather than helping us understand our different views, arguing results in a battle of messages. Rather than drawing us together, arguing pulls us apart.

### Arguing Without Understanding Is Unpersuasive

Arguing creates another problem in difficult conversations: it inhibits change. *Telling* someone to change makes it less rather than more likely that they will. This is because people almost never change without first feeling understood.

Consider Trevor's conversation with Karen. Trevor is the financial administrator for the state Department of Social Services. Karen is a social worker with the department. "I cannot get Karen to turn in her paperwork on time," explains Trevor. "I've told her over and over that she's missing the deadlines, but it doesn't help. And when I bring it up, she gets annoyed."

Of course we know there's another side to this story. Unfortunately, Trevor doesn't know what it is. Trevor is telling Karen what she is supposed to do, but has not yet engaged her in a two-way conversation about the issue. When Trevor shifts his purposes from trying to change Karen's behavior — arguing why being late is wrong — to trying first to *understand* Karen, and then to be understood *by* her, the situation improves dramatically:

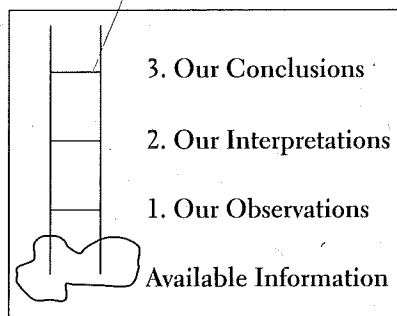
Karen described how overwhelmed and overworked she is. She puts all of her energy into her clients, who are very needy. She was feeling like I didn't appreciate that, which actually, I really didn't. On my end, I explained to her how I have to go through all kinds of extra work when she submits her paperwork late, and I explained the extra work in detail to her. She felt badly about that, and it was clear that she just hadn't thought about it from my perspective. She promised to put a higher priority on getting her work in on time, and so far she has.

Finally, each has learned something, and the stage for meaningful change is set.

To get anywhere in a disagreement, we need to understand the other person's story well enough to see how their conclusions make sense within it. And we need to help them understand the story in which our conclusions make sense. Understanding each other's stories from the inside won't necessarily "solve" the problem, but as with Karen and Trevor, it's an essential first step.

### Different Stories: Why We Each See the World Differently

As we move away from arguing and toward trying to understand the other person's story, it helps to know why people have different stories in the first place. Our stories don't come out of nowhere. They aren't random. Our stories are built in often unconscious but systematic ways. First, we take in information. We experience the world — sights, sounds, and feelings. Second, we interpret what we see, hear, and feel; we give it all meaning. Then we draw



Where Our Stories Come From

*anchors  
frames  
tools  
cognition*

conclusions about what's happening. And at each step, there is an opportunity for different people's stories to diverge.

Put simply, we all have different stories about the world because we each take in different information and then interpret this information in our own unique ways.

In difficult conversations, too often we trade only conclusions back and forth, without stepping down to where most of the real action is: the information and interpretations that lead each of us to see the world as we do.

### 1. We Have Different Information

There are two reasons we all have different information about the world. First, as each of us proceeds through life — and through any difficult situation — the information available to us is overwhelming. We simply can't take in all of the sights, sounds, facts, and feelings involved in even a single encounter. Inevitably, we end up noticing some things and ignoring others. And what we each choose to notice and ignore will be different. Second, we each have access to different information.

**We Notice Different Things.** Doug took his four-year-old nephew, Andrew, to watch a homecoming parade. Sitting on his uncle's shoulders, Andrew shouted with delight as football players, cheerleaders, and the school band rolled by on lavish floats. Afterward Andrew exclaimed, "That was the best truck parade I've ever seen!"

Each float, it seems, was pulled by a truck. Andrew, truck obsessed as he was, saw nothing else. His Uncle Doug, truck indifferent, hadn't noticed a single truck. In a sense, Andrew and his uncle watched completely different parades.

Like Doug and Andrew, what we notice has to do with who we are and what we care about. Some of us pay more attention to feelings and relationships. Others to status and power, or to facts and

*in Doug's  
view*

logic. Some of us are artists, others are scientists, others pragmatists. Some of us want to prove we're right; others want to avoid conflict or smooth it over. Some of us tend to see ourselves as victims, others as heroes, observers, or survivors. The information we attend to varies accordingly.

Of course, neither Doug nor Andrew walked away from the parade thinking, "I enjoyed my particular perspective on the parade based on the information I paid attention to." Each walked away thinking, "I enjoyed *the* parade." Each assumes that what he paid attention to was what was significant about the experience. Each assumes he has "the facts."

In a more serious setting, Randy and Daniel, coworkers on an assembly line, experience the same dynamic. They've had a number of tense conversations about racial issues. Randy, who is white, believes that the company they work for has a generally good record on minority recruitment and promotion. He notices that of the seven people on his assembly team, two are African Americans and one is Latino, and that the head of the union is Latino. He has also learned that his supervisor is originally from the Philippines. Randy believes in the merits of a diverse workplace and has noticed approvingly that several people of color have recently been promoted.

Daniel, who is Korean American, has a different view. He has been on the receiving end of unusual questions about his qualifications. He has experienced several racial slurs from coworkers and one from a foreman. These experiences are prominent in his mind. He also knows of several minority coworkers who were overlooked for promotion, and notices that a disproportionate number of the top executives at the company are white. And Daniel has listened repeatedly to executives who talk as if the only two racial categories that mattered were white and African American.

While Randy and Daniel have some information that is shared, they have quite a bit of information that's not. Yet each assumes that the facts are plain, and his view is reality. In an important sense, it's as if Randy and Daniel work at different companies.

Often we go through an entire conversation — or indeed an entire relationship — without ever realizing that each of us is paying at-

My reality vs  
your reality  
- personal  
- cultural  
- social

tention to different things, that our views are based on different information.

**We Each Know Ourselves Better Than Anyone Else Can.** In addition to *choosing* different information, we each have *access* to different information. For example, others have access to information about themselves that we don't. They know the constraints they are under; we don't. They know their hopes, dreams, and fears; we don't. We act as if we've got access to all the important information there is to know about them, but we don't. Their internal experience is far more complex than we imagine.

Let's return to the example of Jack and Michael. When Michael describes what happened, he doesn't mention anything about Jack's staying up all night. He might not know that Jack stayed up all night, and even if he does, his "knowledge" would be quite limited compared to what Jack knows about it. Jack was there. Jack knows what it felt like as he struggled to stay awake. He knows how uncomfortable it was when the heat was turned off at midnight. He knows how angry his wife was that he had to cancel their dinner together. He knows about the anxiety he felt putting aside other important work to do Michael's project. Jack also knows how happy he felt to be doing a favor for a friend.

And there is plenty that Jack is not aware of. Jack doesn't know that Michael's client blew up just that morning over the choice of photograph in another brochure Michael had prepared. Jack doesn't know that the revenue figures are a particularly hot topic because of questions about some of the client's recent business decisions. Jack doesn't know that Michael's graphic designer has taken an unscheduled personal leave in the midst of their busiest season, affecting not just this project but others as well. Jack doesn't know that Michael has been dissatisfied with some of Jack's work in the past. And Jack doesn't know how happy Michael felt to be doing a favor for a friend.

Of course, in advance, we don't know what we don't know. But rather than assuming we already know everything we need to, we should assume that there is important information we don't have access to. It's a good bet to be true.

## 2. We Have Different Interpretations

"We never have sex," Alvie Singer complains in the movie *Annie Hall*. "We're constantly having sex," says his girlfriend. "How often do you have sex?" asks their therapist. "Three times a week!" they reply in unison.

A second reason we tell different stories about the world is that, even when we have the same information, we interpret it differently — we give it different meaning. I see the cup as half empty; you see it as a metaphor for the fragility of humankind. I'm thirsty; you're a poet. Two especially important factors in how we interpret what we see are (1) our past experiences and (2) the implicit rules we've learned about how things should and should not be done.

**We Are Influenced by Past Experiences.** The past gives meaning to the present. Often, it is only in the context of someone's past experience that we can understand why what they are saying or doing makes any kind of sense.

To celebrate the end of a long project, Bonnie and her co-workers scraped together the money to treat their supervisor, Caroline, to dinner at a nice restaurant. Throughout the meal, Caroline did little but complain: "Everything is overpriced," "How can they get away with this?" and "You've got to be kidding. Five dollars for dessert!" Bonnie went home embarrassed and frustrated, thinking, "We knew she was cheap, but this is ridiculous. We paid so she wouldn't have to worry about the money, and still she complained about the cost. She ruined the evening."

Though the story in Bonnie's head was that Caroline was simply a cheapskate or wet blanket, Bonnie eventually decided to ask Caroline why she had such a strong reaction to the expense of eating out. Upon reflection, Caroline explained:

I suppose it has to do with growing up during the Depression. I can still hear my mother's voice from when I was little, getting ready to

go off to school in the morning. "Carrie, there's a nickel on the counter for your lunch!" she'd call. She was so proud to be able to buy my lunch every day. Once I got to be eight or nine, a nickel wasn't enough to buy lunch anymore. But I never had the heart to tell her.

Years later, even a moderately priced meal can feel like an extravagance to Caroline when filtered through the images and feelings of this experience.

Every strong view you have is profoundly influenced by your past experiences. Where to vacation, whether to spank your kids, how much to budget for advertising — all are influenced by what you've observed in your own family and learned throughout your life. Often we aren't even aware of how these experiences affect our interpretation of the world. We simply believe that this is the way things are.

**We Apply Different Implicit Rules.** Our past experiences often develop into "rules" by which we live our lives. Whether we are aware of them or not, we all follow such rules. They tell us how the world works, how people should act, or how things are supposed to be. And they have a significant influence on the story we tell about what is happening between us in a difficult conversation.

We get into trouble when our rules collide.

Ollie and Thelma, for example, are stuck in a tangle of conflicting rules. As sales representatives, they spend a lot of time together on the road. One evening, they agreed to meet at 7:00 the next morning in the hotel lobby to finish preparing a presentation. Thelma, as usual, arrived at 7:00 sharp. Ollie showed up at 7:10. This was not the first time Ollie had arrived late, and Thelma was so frustrated that she had trouble focusing for the first twenty minutes of their meeting. Ollie was frustrated that Thelma was frustrated.

It helps to clarify the implicit rules that each is unconsciously applying. Thelma's rule is "It is unprofessional and inconsiderate to be late." Ollie's rule is "It is unprofessional to obsess about small things so much that you can't focus on what's important." Because

Thelma and Ollie both interpret the situation through the lens of their own implicit rule, they each see the other person as acting inappropriately.

Our implicit rules often take the form of things people "should" or "shouldn't" do: "You should spend money on education, but not on clothes." "You should never criticize a colleague in front of others." "You should never leave the toilet seat up, squeeze the toothpaste in the middle, or let the kids watch more than two hours of TV." The list is endless.

There's nothing wrong with having these rules. In fact, we need them to order our lives. But when you find yourself in conflict, it helps to make your rules explicit and to encourage the other person to do the same. This greatly reduces the chance that you will be caught in an accidental duel of conflicting rules.

### 3. Our Conclusions Reflect Self-Interest

Finally, when we think about why we each tell our own stories about the world, there is no getting around the fact that our conclusions are partisan, that they often reflect our self-interest. We look for information to support our view and give that information the most favorable interpretation. Then we feel even more certain that our view is right.

Professor Howard Raiffa of the Harvard Business School demonstrated this phenomenon when he gave teams of people a set of facts about a company. He told some of the teams they would be negotiating to buy the company, and others that they would be selling the company. He then asked each team to value the company as objectively as possible (not the price at which they would offer to buy or sell, but what they believed it was actually worth). Raiffa found that sellers, in their heart of hearts, believed the company to be worth on average 30 percent more than the independently assessed fair market value. Buyers, in turn, valued it at 30 percent less.

Each team developed a self-serving perception without realizing they were doing so. They focused more on things that were consistent with what they wanted to believe and tended to ignore, explain

away, and soon forget those that weren't. Our colleague Roger Fisher captured this phenomenon in a wry reflection on his days as a litigator: "I sometimes failed to persuade the court that I was right, but I never failed to persuade myself!"

This tendency to develop unconsciously biased perceptions is very human, and can be dangerous. It calls for a dose of humility about the "rightness" of our story, especially when we have something important at stake.

## Move from Certainty to Curiosity

There's only one way to come to understand the other person's story, and that's by being curious. Instead of asking yourself, "How can they think that?!" ask yourself, "I wonder what information they have that I don't?" Instead of asking, "How can they be so irrational?" ask, "How might they see the world such that their view makes sense?" Certainty locks us out of their story; curiosity lets us in.

### Curiosity: The Way into Their Story

Consider the disagreement between Tony and his wife, Keiko. Tony's sister has just given birth to her first child. The next day Keiko is getting ready to visit the hospital. To her shock, Tony says he's not going with her to visit his sister, but instead is going to watch the football game on TV. When Keiko asks why, Tony mumbles something about this being a "big game," and adds, "I'll stop by the hospital tomorrow."

Keiko is deeply troubled by this. She thinks to herself, "What kind of person thinks football is more important than family? That's the most selfish, shallow, ridiculous thing I've ever heard!" But she catches herself in her own certainty, and instead of saying, "How could you do such a thing?" she negotiates herself to a place of curiosity. She wonders what Tony knows that she doesn't, how he's seeing the world such that his decision seems to make sense.

The story Tony tells is different from what Keiko had imagined. From the outside, Tony is watching a game on TV. But to Tony it's a matter of his mental health. Throughout the week, he works ten hours a day under extremely stressful conditions, then comes home and plays with his two boys, doing whatever they want. After the struggle of getting them to bed, he spends time with Keiko, talking mostly about her day. Finally, he collapses into bed. For Tony, watching the game is the one time during the week when he can truly relax. His stress level goes down, almost as if he's meditating, and this three hours to himself has a significant impact on his ability to take on the week ahead. Since Tony believes that his sister won't care whether he comes today or tomorrow, he chooses in favor of his mental health.

Of course, that's not the end of the issue. Keiko needs to share her story with Tony, and then, once everything is on the table, together they can figure out what to do. But that will never happen if Keiko simply assumes she knows Tony's story, no matter how certain she is at the outset that she does.

### What's Your Story?

One way to shift your stance from the easy certainty of feeling that you've thought about this from every possible angle is to get curious about what you don't know about *yourself*. This may sound like an odd thing to worry about. After all, you're with yourself all the time; wouldn't you be pretty familiar with your own perspective?

In a word, no. The process by which we construct our stories about the world often happens so fast, and so automatically, that we are not even aware of all that influences our views. For example, when we saw what Jack was really thinking and feeling during his conversation with Michael, there was nothing about the heat being turned off, or about his wife's anger at canceling their dinner plans. Even Jack wasn't fully aware of all the information behind his reactions.

And what implicit rules are important to him? Jack thinks to himself, "I can't believe the way Michael treated me," but he is un-

aware that this is based on an implicit rule of how people "should" treat each other. Jack's rule is something like "You should always show appreciation to others no matter what." Many of us agree with this rule, but it is not a truth, just a rule. Michael's rule might be "Good friends can get angry with each other and not take it personally." The point isn't whose rule is better; the point is that they are different. But Jack won't know they're different unless he first considers what rules underlie his own story about what happened.

Recall the story of Andrew and his Uncle Doug at the parade. We referred to Andrew as "truck obsessed." This description is from his uncle's point of view. Uncle Doug is aware of "how Andrew is," but he is less aware of how he himself "is." Andrew is truck obsessed if we use as the baseline his Uncle Doug's level of interest in trucks, which is zero. But from Andrew's point of view, Uncle Doug might be considered "cheerleader obsessed." Among the four-year-old crowd, Andrew's view is more likely the norm.

### Embrace Both Stories: Adopt the "And Stance"

It can be awfully hard to stay curious about another person's story when you have your own story to tell, especially if you're thinking that only one story can really be right. After all, your story is so different from theirs, and makes so much sense to you. Part of the stress of staying curious can be relieved by adopting what we call the "And Stance."

We usually assume that we must either accept or reject the other person's story, and that if we accept theirs, we must abandon our own. But who's right between Michael and Jack, Ollie and Thelma, or Bonnie and her boss, Caroline? Who's right between a person who likes to sleep with the window open and another who prefers the window closed?

The answer is that the question makes no sense. Don't choose between the stories; embrace both. That's the And Stance.

The suggestion to embrace both stories can sound like double-

talk. It can be heard as "Pretend both of your stories are right." But in fact, it suggests something quite different. Don't pretend anything. Don't worry about accepting or rejecting the other person's story. First work to understand it. The mere act of understanding someone else's story doesn't require you to give up your own. The And Stance allows you to recognize that how you *each* see things matters, that how you each feel matters. Regardless of what you end up doing, regardless of whether your story influences theirs or theirs yours, both stories matter.

The And Stance is based on the assumption that the world is complex, that you can feel hurt, angry, and wronged, *and* they can feel just as hurt, angry, and wronged. They can be doing their best, *and* you can think that it's not good enough. You may have done something stupid, *and* they will have contributed in important ways to the problem as well. You can feel furious with them, *and* you can also feel love and appreciation for them.

The And Stance gives you a place from which to assert the full strength of your views and feelings without having to diminish the views and feelings of someone else. Likewise, you don't need to give up anything to hear how someone else feels or sees things differently. Because you may have different information or different interpretations, both stories can make sense at the same time.

It may be that as you share them, your stories change in response to new information or different perspectives. But they still may not end up the same, and that's all right. Sometimes people have honest disagreements, but even so, the most useful question is not "Who's right?" but "Now that we really understand each other, what's a good way to manage this problem?"

## Two Exceptions That Aren't

You may be thinking that the advice to shift from certainty and arguing to curiosity and the And Stance generally makes sense, but that there must be exceptions. Let's look at two important questions that

may look like exceptions, but aren't: (1) What about times when I absolutely *know* I'm right? and (2) Does the suggestion to "understand the other person's story" always apply, even when, for example, I'm firing or breaking up with someone?

## I Really Am Right

There's an old story of two clerics arguing about how to do God's work. In the spirit of conciliation, one finally says to the other, "You and I see things differently, and that's okay. We don't need to agree. You can do God's work your way, and I'll do God's work His way."

The tendency to think this way can be overwhelming. Even if you understand another person's story with genuine insight and empathy, you may still stumble on the next step, thinking that however much their story makes sense to them, you are still "right" and they are still "wrong."

For example, what about the conversation you have with your daughter about her smoking? You know you are right that smoking is bad for her, that the sooner she stops the better.

Fair enough. About each of those things, you *are* right. But here's the rub: *that's not what the conversation is really about*. It's about how you *each* feel about your daughter's smoking, what she should do about it, and what role you should play. It's about the terrible fear and sadness you feel as you imagine her becoming sick, and your rage at feeling powerless to make her stop. It's about her need to feel independent, to break out of the "good girl" mold that feels so suffocating. It's about her own ambivalence doing something that makes her feel good and at the same time truly frightens her. The conversation is about many issues between the two of you that are complex and important to explore. It is not about the truth of whether smoking is bad for one's health. Both of you already agree on that.

Even when it seems the dispute is about what's true, you may find that being the one who's right doesn't get you very far. Your friend may deny that he is an alcoholic and that his drinking is affecting his

marriage. But even if the whole world agrees with your assessment, asserting that you are right and trying to get him to admit it probably won't help you help your friend.

What *may* help is to tell him about the impact his drinking has on you, and, further, to try to understand his story. What is keeping him in denial? What would it mean to him to admit he has a problem? What gets in the way? Until you understand his story, and share yours with him, you can't help him find a way to rewrite the next chapter for the better. In this case, you may be right and your friend may be wrong, but merely being right doesn't do you much good.

### Giving Bad News

What if you have to fire someone, end a relationship, or let a supplier know you're cutting back on orders by 80 percent? In many difficult conversations, you don't have the power to impose an outcome unilaterally. When firing someone or breaking up or reducing orders, you do. In such situations, it's reasonable to wonder whether the other person's story is still relevant.

Most of the difficulty in firing someone or in breaking up takes place in the Feelings and Identity Conversations, which we'll explore later. But the question of differing perspectives is also important. Remember, understanding the other person's story doesn't mean you have to agree with it, nor does it require you to give up your own. And the fact that you are willing to try to understand their view doesn't diminish the power you have to implement your decision, and to be clear that your decision is final.

In fact, the And Stance is probably the most powerful place to stand when engaging in a difficult conversation that requires you to deliver or enforce bad news. If you are breaking up with someone, it allows you to, say "I'm breaking up with you because it's the right thing for me [here's why], *and* I understand how hurt you are, and that you think we should try again, *and* I'm not changing my mind, *and* I understand that you think I should have been more clear about my confusion earlier, *and* I don't think that makes me a bad person,

*and* I understand that I've done things that have hurt you, *and* I know you've done things that have hurt me, *and* I know I might regret this decision, *and* I'm still making it. . . . *And, and, and.*"

"And" helps you to be curious *and* clear.

### To Move Forward, First Understand Where You Are

As you head down the path of improving how you deal with difficult conversations, you will notice that the question of how we each make sense of our worlds follows you like the moon in the night sky. It's a beacon you can return to no matter where you are or with what difficult problem you are grappling.

Coming to understand the other person, and yourself, more deeply doesn't mean that differences will disappear or that you won't have to solve real problems and make real choices. It doesn't mean that all views are equally valid or that it's wrong to have strongly held beliefs. It will, however, help you evaluate whether your strong views make sense in light of new information and different interpretations, and it will help you help others to appreciate the power of those views.

Wherever you want to go, understanding — imagining yourself into the other person's story — has got to be your first step. Before you can figure out how to move forward, you need to understand where you are.

The next two chapters delve more deeply into two problematic aspects of our story — our tendency to misunderstand their intentions, and our tendency to focus on blame.

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