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Career Path: Why You Should Doubt Yourself

Skills and Professional Development

For years, I recalled with admiration the phrase I heard a famous general counsel say once when describing himself: “Often wrong, never in doubt.” With time, I’ve come to see that doubting is the key to being wrong less often.

This is because being convinced we’re right is one of the greatest obstacles to good decision-making. Certainty is usually the enemy of quality decisions. Let me explain why I think this, and give you my tip for how to avoid the trap.

It is easy to see when someone else is being pigheaded. The most obvious sign is that they disagree with you. The ones who particularly get our goat, though, are the ones who zealously defend their position against all reason.

These people refuse to be swayed by all the facts and evidence that point to them being wrong. Don't they see how their certainty just makes them foolish?

No matter how often we observe this in others, I find it fascinating that the fewest among us make the link to *how we must look* when we ourselves are certain about something. After all, **when we're certain it's because we're right**. When other people are certain it's because they're idiots who don't know how to think.

I suppose it is possible some people are true savants, making correct assessments of all situations all the time. Based on decades of careful observation, I'm guessing the number of such people is small. Sadly, the odds are good that you and I are not among the perfect savants.

For starters, anyone who has been married must readily concede that *no one is right all the time*. You need only consider all the times your spouse correctly pointed out you were wrong about something to know the truth of this.

And **we can be just as wrong about something when we are absolutely convinced it's true as when we're uncertain**. Being convinced we're right carries with it several heavy burdens:

- We become closed to new inputs, and tend to seek out evidence to confirm our existing belief (confirmation bias);
- We make worse decisions, because we stop seeking out new or contradictory information; and
- To justify our bad decisions, we shift blame to other people and factors outside our control.

I have had the good fortune of having my many errors happily pointed out to me by colleagues and friends. And they've been doing it for years! Interestingly, I find my conviction is still as strong as ever, no matter how many times I am proven wrong.

When we think we are right, we can't help but think we're right. Knowing the dangers implicit in this facet of human nature, is there anything we can do?

In my case, the frequent reminders of my fallibility have brought me one very useful practice that I try to apply whenever I can: **I leave open the possibility that I may be wrong**. I still believe what I believe is true, but I will now often add to the end of a statement the words, "...but I could be wrong."

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That phrase is almost magical in its import. It accomplishes many things. When you add **"... but I could be wrong"** to the end of a statement:

1. It means in your mind you are not committed to the absolute truth of what you just said. As a result, you are able to listen to what others say.
2. It means the person you are talking with does not consider you closed and is more likely *to listen to you*. This creates the condition for a dialogue in which you are as interested in learning something as you are in making a point.
3. Because you are less emotionally committed to what you said, it means you are less likely to feel compelled to defend it against all attacks. If it is just something you are discussing and not a personally-held belief, an attack on the statement is not an attack on you.

If you like the idea of being certain is no guarantee of being correct, then you are already on the path to better decision-making. If you further agree small changes made consistently can create great results (continuous improvement), then perhaps you will try out saying "But I could be wrong..." yourself.

Be well.

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