

THE power OF wrong

by Steven Gaffney

How a Simple Shift in Understanding Can Improve Decision-Making and Positively Affect the Bottom Line

If only I had known. It's a terrible thought most of us have had at one point—usually when we have discovered a big problem that started out small. The good news is most problems really do start out small. The better news is that a simple shift in understanding will empower you and those in your organization to improve communication and mend these small, lurking problems before they disrupt your business. That shift in understanding can ultimately net great bottom-line results.

I was on my way to a speaking engagement recently and carried on the usual brief introductory conversation with the person seated next to me on the plane. Since I had an extra copy of my book *Just Be Honest* (which includes how to handle “If only I had known” situations), I gave it to him before taking a nap. When I awoke, he told me he wished he had read the book sooner as he was preparing to announce some major layoffs at his company. When I asked how this related to my book, he explained how they had just lost a major re-compete with a long-standing client to a competitor. The competitor's proposal had what the client really wanted, while his company had what they thought the long-time client was looking for, based on their prior working relationship. The result? A lost contract, lost jobs, and a major loss in revenue.

This story illustrates a powerful truth we can harness to positively impact our personal and professional lives. Consider for a moment how often people operate and make decisions as if their opinions are facts. The trouble is, according to our research based on more than 15 years of conducting seminars, we can often be between 50 and 80 percent wrong on a daily basis. That may be hard to believe, but the mind tends to remember the times we are correct and forget the times we are not. That

means we may be wrong more often than we are right.

Think about it. Have you seen missed opportunities because someone believes they know what their customer wants, rather than finding out what the customer actually wants? Or have you ever seen project execution go awry because goals were based on assumptions rather than facts and data points?

This is a simple problem to understand, but not so simple to fix—and it's easy to blame other people as well. For example, do you think of yourself as open-minded? How about those around you? Here is a test to gauge your open-mindedness: How long can you listen to a talk show host who represents views with which you disagree before you change the station? Or when was the last time you had a discussion with someone with whom you disagreed and came away from the conversation converted to their viewpoint? Being open-minded is much more challenging than we often like to admit.

A key strategy in solving this problem is to understand the difference between what can be “noticed” (the facts of a situation) and what we “imagine” (our opinions, thoughts, evaluations, conclusions). This may sound simple—and it is—but think how often people operate and make decisions as if their opinions are fact, or as if what they “imagine” is correct instead of discovering the truth. Once we develop a conclusion we start to look for evidence to support it, and will often overlook facts inconsistent with our opinions and conclusions in the process. The misdiagnosis becomes even more exacerbated when the people with whom we interact have different agendas, goals, needs, and backgrounds. When we fully understand the breadth and scope of the distinction between Notice and Imagine it can produce major breakthroughs, especially in

conjunction with research showing we are often wrong in what we imagine.

Check out the logic. When we understand we may be wrong, we ask more questions. The more we ask questions, the more likely we are to find out the real underlying facts. The more facts we find out, the better the quality of our decisions; the better the quality of our decisions, the better the quality of our business and even our personal lives. The man I met on the plane highlights this point. He read about this concept of Notice vs. Imagine in my book and immediately recognized what had happened with his former client. As he went on to tell me, if he had known about this he would have been able to save jobs and revenue—and avoid a lot of stress, too.

Notice vs. Imagine gives us an excellent reason to check in with others and ask questions. It reminds us to go and ask for feedback and information rather than passively waiting for others to provide it.

I heard from a manager at a large corporation who had been told to fire an employee who was performing poorly. He decided to ask the person what was going on. It turned out this person's son had just undergone open-heart surgery. The employee had never said anything to his boss because he preferred not to discuss his personal life. Clearly, the facts surrounding this employee's situation did not resemble what the boss had imagined. It is critical to remember that even though employees may not ask for help, you can always talk to them.

This concept has important implications for our personal lives and can be easily applied there as well. The following story is from one of my seminar participants:

"A while back, my husband and I ordered pizza. After 45 minutes we called to find out when we could expect delivery. We called again after an hour and finally after an hour and fifteen minutes, we called and cancelled our order. As we were walking out the door to go grab a bite, our pizza delivery lady showed up with our pizza. My husband and I told her that we had cancelled our order and now no longer wanted the pizza. She apologized for being late and told us we could have the pizza for free. We told her, 'No, thanks. We decided to go out to eat.'

All of a sudden she started to cry. 'My father died last week and today is the first time I've really felt that he's gone,' she said. She couldn't stop crying while she told us how she kept getting lost in our neighborhood all night even though she delivers pizza there all the time. She said the people in the last home she delivered to yelled at her for being late and she felt terrible about that, too. I threw my arms around her and hugged her tightly. My husband stepped up and did the same. We paid for the pizza and invited her in to have dinner with us.

A couple of weeks later, there was a knock on the door and there stood Vicky the pizza lady. She told us she wanted to buy us a gift but there was no gift that could ever express the appreciation she felt for our kindness that night. Instead, now when she drives by our home she sends good wishes our way, she said.

One night my husband and I were driving home and we happened to be behind Vicky. I'm sure she didn't know we were there. We live on a corner and when we turned onto our street we watched her drive by and wave toward our home, throwing good wishes our way.

Vicky gave us an immeasurable gift...she gave us an unforgettable life lesson."

It is easy to make assumptions and draw faulty conclusions based on a lack of information. Maybe someone who is not returning our calls is not trying to be disrespectful; maybe they just didn't receive the messages because they were out of town and did not change their voice mail accordingly. Maybe they did receive our messages but are embarrassed to call and let us know they are behind schedule. Or maybe they did not do what they said they would do, and by not calling they are avoiding the anticipated conflict.

Maybe when someone snaps at us, it has nothing to do with us. Maybe instead they are having some personal problems at home (e.g. an elderly parent who is sick or a child who is not doing well in school). Maybe they are under stress or feeling extreme pressure over work issues. As a result they may take it out on us, but it really has nothing to do with us.

I am not making a judgment about the behavior being right or wrong; I am simply saying things are not always as they appear. Understanding the difference between noticing and imagining enables us to be open-minded and get the information we need.

Just imagine a workplace and home life where everyone understands they might be wrong—or is at least in need of more information. If that were the case, people would be more likely to check in before making decisions or drawing conclusions. In the absence of being certain they knew everything, people would be more likely to give others the benefit of the doubt. The outcome would be more open lines of communication, reduced defensiveness, more appropriate expectations, greater collaboration and teamwork, improved sales, and better-executed programs—all of which would make organizations more efficient and more profitable, and all of which I have consistently seen when organizations embrace and execute this understanding.

One way to make an immediate impact is to pass this article along to important people in your life. Talk about it and discuss what you and others can do. If you need help, call me.

Steven Gaffney is a leading expert on honest, interpersonal communication, influence and leadership, and is one of the recognized authorities on the subject of honesty. He is the author of two ground-breaking books, Just Be Honest: Authentic Communication Strategies that Get Results and Last a Lifetime and Honest Works! Real-World Solutions to Common Problems at Work and Home. He is also the co-author of the book Honesty Sells: How to Make More Money and Increase Business Profits.

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