

Skill-building: Handling Conflict Effectively

Cultivating Doubt

Doubt has been coming up a lot lately – in articles, conversations, and even the political arena. The presidential campaign and debates, as well as ongoing discussions in Congress, are models of non-doubt that are presented to us as reassuring and confident.



However, non-doubt is not necessarily a sign of strength or confidence, especially when it comes to avoiding or handling conflict effectively. There is a body of knowledge suggesting that doubt is actually an important ingredient in happiness and success in life. It boosts self-confidence, opens minds, allows us to experience intimacy, and enriches spirituality. It even leads to breakthroughs in business. In his book *Uncertainty: Turning Fear and Doubt into Fuel for Brilliance*, Jonathan Fields talks about how uncertainty is not only normal, it's necessary for creativity and following your passion.

In the July/August 2012 edition of *Ode Magazine*, Diana Rico authored a piece called “Sure Enough”, which examines doubt. She cites research demonstrating that when we hear statements that contradict our ethical beliefs, we react within .25 seconds, and almost instantly stop listening—shutting off any doubts. She describes a 2010 study by Gal & Rucker which found that people who were injected with doubt became even fiercer advocates for their beliefs “as if they now had to try to convince themselves as well as others.”

Rico also talks about the benefits of doubt. She cites the number of incarcerated folks — disproportionately people of color and youth—who have been exonerated of the crimes for which they were convicted, due to new DNA testing methods ...and yet police and prosecutors *insist they were right anyway!* She examines the role that doubting what we think we can or can't do can lead us to tremendous breakthroughs and bursts of self-confidence.

Injecting doubt into our lives can lead to breakthroughs, profound realizations and higher achievements. It can lead to truth and justice. However, it can also trigger deep fears and defenses because it feels vulnerable, and therefore weak! Questioning these beliefs and assumptions about vulnerability and weakness, understanding there is great power and value in an open, “not knowing” – such as key insights, problem-solving, problem avoidance, and relationship building – can help keep our reptilian “downstairs brain” from being triggered, and maintain the higher functions of our “upstairs brain” online!

Willingness to doubt—even cultivating it—is a key skill in developing curiosity. Doubting ourselves in moderation is a “critical internal skill” which helps us avoid conflict in the first place, and also to manage it once it’s happening. Approaching a sensitive topic, delicate situation, or conflict with doubt and curiosity is *efficient*! Exploring others’ perspectives, ideas, feelings, and values clears away assumptions, builds understanding and gets to solutions more quickly, especially when interacting across some dimension of human difference!

Here are some powerful questions to guide your "cultivation of doubt":

- What is true?
- How do I *know* this is true?
- What *evidence* is there that this is true?
- What evidence is there that *the opposite* (or other possibilities) is true?
- What would it *mean* if that opposite (or other possibilities) were true?
- What would *be required of me* if that opposite (or other possibilities) were true?

These questions may or may not lead you to change your mind, but they will open your thinking, relax your defenses, and increase empathy. These are all vital for being effective in relationship, especially across differences.

Enjoy cultivating and exploring. Be courageous and wildly daring!

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