

The Justice Academy Journal

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Certainty, the Search for Truth, and Leadership

We have all been guilty of over confidence, excessive reliance on intuition in problem solving situations, and far greater levels of imprecision when we find ourselves engaged in rendering judgments about the world. These imperfections are likely predicated on our perceived need for expedience, the apparent absence of real evidence to support a decision, or simply based on our assurance that our lofty positions in the organization must attest to our preeminence of judgment in all situations. Needless to say, no matter how we choose to rationalize it, this is nonsense and fundamentally wrong. Certainty in decision making is an elusive target for most of us, yet we seldom lack confidence in our ability to make the correct choice when faced with tough decisions and we are protected, we believe, by the hierarchical nature of our profession from challenge.

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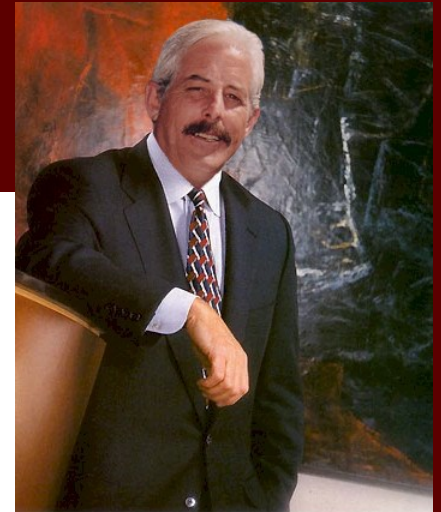
We live in a world where there is no one right answer to the challenges we face as a nation after all, but we tend to forget that there are answers that are more correct than others in most situations. And yet, most of us have no clue how to reach *the more correct answer* that is based on a comprehensive assessment of a myriad of factors and variables that are associated with the issue we are endeavoring to resolve. Instead we rely on our intuition, past experience, perceived wisdom, and a few tangible notions that have occurred to us while we were thinking about the problem, in order to derive an answer that will suffice for the situation at hand. We also trust that our force of will, rank, and self-assuredness will prevail in convincing others that we are right.

There is a terrific quote that attests to this phenomenon in the faith business that says “Our preachers aren’t always right, but they’re never in doubt”, which I believe can be equally applied to almost any enterprise, no matter the mission, especially ours. One of the more interesting aspects of the dynamic of certainty measurement is the associated decibel level that goes along with it when the premises and conclusions of a leader’s assertions and logic of

their argument are challenged. I suspect that most of us can recall situations where the person making the claim raised their voice in an attempt to validate their assertions and communicate their conviction of belief, and the more they were challenged, the louder they argued their point. It didn’t make them right, just loud.

Another common defense involves the certainty and accuracy of the judgment because of the stature of their office and their perceived notion that because they occupy the office, they must be the smartest person in all the land. It seems silly when you think about it, but we’ve all witnessed examples of people in positions of power defending their judgment because they sit in the chair that is supposed to be occupied by the wisest person of the village. In fact, this is rarely the case, and the chair is merely occupied by the most ambitious or fortunate person in the village, city, county, state, department, or nation. Evidence is all around us if we care to take note of those decisions that fall well short of the truth and which provided little, if any, resolution to the complex issues and challenges of the day.

About the Author:



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Hal Campbell currently serves as the Executive Director of JusticeAcademy.org. He also serves as a member of the teaching faculty for the University of Maryland concentrating in the areas of public policy strategy, criminal law, constitutional law, justice administration, empirical analyses, and higher education.

Judge Campbell recently concluded a term of service as a member of the judiciary in the State of Montana. His appointment to the bench was bestowed by the Montana Supreme Court, Commission on Courts of Limited Jurisdiction. Prior to this appointment to the bench, he served for over twenty-five years as a tenured professor and department chair with the California State University. His public policy and law enforcement experience includes a variety of senior management positions with the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department. From 1978 to 1989 he held positions in the department including Law Enforcement Planning Coordinator, Chief Analyst, and began his career as a Deputy Sheriff.

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By the time the truth was realized, that temporary resident of the chair was long gone and we were left with even greater problems to overcome.

There are a few simple methods that can be used to derive the truth for those who aspire to reach such a conclusion however. The first is to surround yourself with smart people, whose ego is so well intact that they never espouse a position that they have all the answers, but rather that they are willing to go to great lengths to do the work required to eliminate the superfluous, include the relevant, and prioritize the tangible in order to create a decision making sequence that gets as close to the truth as possible. We often forget that the reason we form committees is not just to assure broad participation and buy in, but rather we do so from a perspective of statistical probability that asserts that the more people we include in the process, the greater the statistical likelihood they will bring with them variables, insights, and contributive factors that we might not know about or routinely consider within our isolated hierarchy of influencers. This is also why we employ the scientific method before rendering a conclusion about a theory. It is why our form of representative governance seeks broad participation from the population with the formation of legislatures, congress, and city councils. Or at least it used to be the reason before this current trend toward partisanship at the expense of reason. Under such an approach, we stand a better chance of isolating relevant factors and rendering decisions that are more accurate, include the examination of most relevant variables, and consider the consequences of our decisions across the broadest spectrum possible.

We should never accept anyone's input and commentary as gospel, but instead demand of them empirical evidence in support of their contentions. It seems a reasonable approach to demand from others the same requirements for accuracy that we hold for ourselves. This one point is really elusive for most people, because they haven't the skills necessary to create such complex equations, nor the patience to put off making a decision until they have all of the evidence necessary to render the most correct answer attainable. Instead they see indecision and hesitance as a sign of weakness or as a lack of conviction, and more often than not, they dismiss the obvious in a rush to judgment resulting in a decision that is either obviously wrong or, at best, not as right as it could have been.

I have written in numerous journal articles and books over the years that suggest that nothing is simple in this world and that no decision should be based merely on qualitative intuition, someone's experience, gut feelings, status, or perceived beliefs of how the world is put together. Some have told me that I have been shouting at the rain for my efforts to continue to point out such cautions, but as an educator, public safety administrator, and member of the judiciary, I always believed that I was bound by a covenant to assure that decisions are rendered beyond a reasonable doubt and based squarely on the examination of the evidence available. Or more importantly, to remind people that it is an absolutely acceptable practice to withhold judgment until there is sufficient evidence to assure accuracy.

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I am certain that despite our desire to think of the world as simple, it simply isn't, and everything that we encounter and every decision that we make is complex in structure, multivariate in nature, and requires our careful and deliberate examination of a plethora of variables and influences that extend in multiple directions, in order to derive the most correct answer possible. Some variables we have control over and others we simply do not. Some factors are direct in nature to the outcome and others have a second-order effect, or even serve as tertiary influences on the second-order factors as applied to their level of discriminate power. The subtle nature of the interaction of all variables upon one another, as well as the individual and aggregate influence they exert over the outcome of an equation, requires a comprehensive look at each relationship (individually), followed by an assessment of the direct, indirect, and relevant strength of all the variables, as applied to influencing the situation under review. Every equation is a little different, some are similar, but none that I have studied is easy.

It appears evident to me based upon a lifetime of observing the behavior and decisions of others that there is considerable room for improvement in our ability as a society to employ critical thinking strategies, along with multivariate reasoning methods, to elevate the level of discourse in our society. Unfortunately, logic and reasoning are not taught as a formal course of study in our K-12 education system where everyone would have exposure to such an important idea. We see evidence all around us these days where logic and analysis plays no role in societal behavior, political decision making, or administrative leadership of our most critical institutions. Perhaps it's time to add a fourth R to the basic requirements of our K-12 curriculum (Reasoning) so that everyone has an opportunity to study what constitutes an argument, what serves as evidence, how to form a conclusion based on the evidence, or how to withhold judgment until you have all the facts.

Fortunately for all of us, this isn't the proper forum to go into detail about such complex decision making methodologies, but rather it is my hope in this brief treatise to remind each of us that being right and having certainty in our judgments is a difficult enterprise, and we all need to be mindful of just how hard it is to not fall victim to the pitfalls of group dynamics, perceived self-importance, the trappings of our authority, or the righteousness of our convictions and biases when engaged in the search for truth. Rather than criticize one another's position on an issue or motivation for adopting a conclusion, we should instead inquire as to how they derived their conclusion and then challenge the legitimacy of their decision based on the data they used, it's relevance to the argument, or the strength of the correlations used to prove the relationships that lead them to their decision. This approach constitutes true debate and discourse about the issues of the day, the facts, and we are all well served, I believe, to engage in such practices in our search for the truth.



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