



Rethinking the way we think: Broadening our perspective

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It was the last lecture of my semester at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business as my professor flashed this quote on one of the lecture slides: "It isn't what you don't know that gets you into trouble. It's what you know for sure that just isn't so." -- Mark Twain.

The course was titled "Forecasting" where we were taught to use statistical techniques and historical data to model and predict the future. Even though it may seem intuitive to follow a set of guidelines and make predictions based on data, it is crucial to note how forecasting involves subjectivity and differences in assumptions. What might seem obvious or relevant to one individual could actually be totally false or irrelevant to someone else.

In fact, not many people would know that the quote used by the professor in the class is attributed to Mark Twain but there is no concrete evidence behind it since it is also often attributed to several other writers and humorists like Josh Billings, Artemus Ward. Yet, the creator remains anonymous if we rely on the current evidence. This leads to the following set of observations about what process tends to work for this to happen: Statements might get rephrased over time, Statements are combined to produce new statements which differ from their original form, and, Attributions may get shifted from one person to another. Our brain makes it easier to believe and accept false statements because it is easier than to analyze and critically evaluate what is being said.

In this 'post-truth' era, it becomes critical to question and verify the credibility of sources of information. More often than not, our perspective is limited by the narrow world we see around us. It is important to keep our views from being formed just by what goes on in a small subset of the world. Human beings are creatures that tend to look at everything from their pair of lenses which filter everything they see by their own personal belief systems, motivations, personal history and experiences. Most people are so rooted in their beliefs that they not only get comfortable in their ignorance but also become hostile to anyone who presents a different opinion as they like to be comfortable with familiar illusions. The primary reason why we keep ourselves from entertaining different perspectives than ours is the rooted beliefs and fears holding us back.

With the ever-increasing emphasis on data and analytics, it is crucial that we develop a sense of judgement that most people now lack. It is easy to get caught up in numbers and forget that what lies beneath them might tell us a different story. It is thus, crucial to develop a certain degree of distance to look at things and delve into the nitty-gritty of the situation before crunching numbers. That way, we would be able to ensure that the data completely supports the theory and eliminate confirmation bias. Although it is a part of being human that we get swayed by emotions rather than facts, one cannot ignore the importance of relying on credible and accurate information. Impressions once formed, are often hard to overcome and misinformation spreads faster than anything. For every school of thought, it is possible to find a contrasting viewpoint. That does not imply the need to label one as correct and the other being deemed wrong.



In many situations, it helps to find the sum of all perspectives and then operate within it to arrive at a suitable solution.

One must wonder if this sentiment of fear is limited to human beings or has it been imbibed by nature into every animal. One interesting research that illustrates the depth of this matter can be found from a recent study conducted by Pavel Šustr, a Czech biologist. The border between what is today, the Czech Republic, and Germany is about 500 miles long and has no checkpoints or guards because of the Schengen agreement and the European Union. However, back in the days of the Cold war and Iron curtain, the border between these two lands had three rows of electrified fencing, with heavily armed guards, watchdogs and other entrapments that made sure no one crossed without permission. There were a lot of deer that died due to the electrified fence and learnt with time that it was best to avoid this cruel human-made device which cut through their forest. Thus, they created new paths which kept them within the Czech area of the forest while their other neighbours remained on their side of the fence. After 1989, when the fall of the Berlin wall marked a new era, the border fence was removed. The study found that even after the physical restrictions were gone, the deer kept their habit of avoiding the area where the horrific electric fence was once present. He learnt that the area where fence once stood has been a behaviour that has stuck to this day among the deer population, long after the wall was gone. It is almost certain that none of the deer which were under study were actually present at the time when the fence existed because the average lifespan of a deer is about 15 years. Yet, it is astonishing that still, the deer continue to follow the path established by their previous generations. Fawns tend to learn the route at an early age from their mothers who had been taught to follow the same route.

Similarly, in the human context, our insecurities hold us back because we fear that respecting other perspectives might mean losing an argument. We tend to abstain from testing opposing opinions because of the fear of being proven wrong, so much that we don't even wish to consider those perspectives. But there is another angle to it if we look at the other side of the coin and be more inclusive. It allows us to make better judgements and create value not only for ourselves but also for the other person. Inclusion of other perspectives can lead to solutions instead of compromises. For instance, I recently attended the World Business Dialogue in Germany and based on my discussion with the fellow delegates noted some interesting observations about the future of education and knowledge which directly relates to how we perceive and observe. Knowledge is an eternally iterative process. We are always evolving and learning from the experiences of ourselves and others around us. Rather than categorizing everything into "black" and "white", we should question if the world is more subjective and there are shades of grey around us. The truth is that we cannot and maybe, never will discover the eternal truth-- rather, we just move closer to be less wrong as we learn and relearn. Life becomes much more fun if we were to believe that we're wrong about everything. This simply means that we should acquaint ourselves with uncertainty and give ourselves enough room to learn and improve from those mistakes. It is then that every moment becomes an opportunity to develop new perspectives that evolve with time and it certainly makes all the difference.



Often the way to discover new horizons is full of problems but we need to tackle problems as challenges and not obstructions in our paths to redefine how we think. We can do so by practising empathetic listening, keeping aside our preconceived notions, and accepting that we do not know everything by being open to learning. By critically thinking through every bit of information, we can formulate a way to counter misinformation. This would be a gradual process, but the benefits are going to sustain over a period of many years. Lastly, being responsible about what we say, and spreading is an essential responsibility on our part.

Moreover, there is always a scope for learning and improving our reasoning ability. One of my recent experiences taught me how one can discover learning opportunities even in seemingly perfect situations. I was a part of a well-functioning, efficient team and we would always deliver on time, had established mutual trust and respect managing to create an environment of psychological safety within the team. This eventually led to great performance but soon we realized that there was no one to critique the points that were proposed. We established a developmental action step where one person would play the role of the devil's advocate in every team meeting. This person was responsible for voicing an opposing opinion to the discussion and critically thinking through its validity regardless of what their true opinion was. This forced our group to get out of our comfort zone by considering a different point of view, creating a culture of dissent and allowed us to entertain certain elements of an idea without accepting the whole of it.

We never know if, after hundreds of years, people will look back and wonder how we were afraid to appreciate those whom we love, and laugh at how we let our narrow mindset chasing money and jobs define us, laugh at the wars, worries and superstitions. They might understand truths about us which none of us knows about, yet. The fact of the matter is that just like us, they will be wrong too, although a little less wrong and would have developed a better sense of judgement and a broader perspective.