DEVELOPMENT DIGEST

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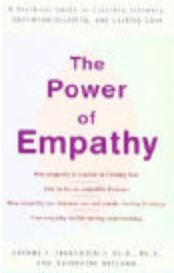
THE POWER OF EMPATHY: A BOOK SUMMARY



The Power of Empathy by Arthur P. Ciaramicoli and Katherine Ketcham (2000)

Empathy is defined as "the capacity to understand and respond to the unique experiences of another." In *The Power of Empathy*, Arthur Ciaramicoli and Katherine Ketchum explain how each of us can bring more empathy into our lives. The authors distinguish empathy from sympathy. Sympathy is about connecting everything the other person says to our own experiences and then making comments that do not honor the uniqueness of the other person's thoughts or feelings like, "I understand exactly what you're feeling," or "I know what you're going through."

Empathy, on the other hand, is always centered on the other person. In effect, through empathy we attempt to enter into the other person's reality in an effort to truly understand them. Drawing on his own experience of a brother who committed suicide, as well as his experiences as a therapist, Ciaramicoli tells us that it is not enough to feel empathy, we must express it as well.

The book sets out seven essential steps to expressing empathy which include: ask open-ended questions, slow down, avoid snap judgments, pay attention to your body, learn from the past, let the story unfold, and set limits. The dark side of empathy is also explored and we are provided with insight as to how we can protect ourselves in situations where empathy is being used to harm rather than to help.

How often are we guilty of listening with "half and ear," filtering information through our own biases, or acting with sympathy as we relate everything that is being said to our own experiences? How often are we distracted while we attempt to hear what someone else is saying? The authors instruct us in tools for empathic listening and explain that listening with empathy requires "focusing in and paying attention, not only to the words being spoken but to gestures, general posture, body position, and facial expressions." They ask us to make a conscious effort to set aside our biases, to discover how to live with ambiguity and the inability to find answers or solutions to all problems.

Through empathy, the authors believe, we can "increase our self-awareness, strengthen our relationships, and understand people who might at first seem strange or unlovable." I once saw a bumper sticker on a car that read "The mind is like a parachute, it only works when it's open." Empathy is one way we can open our minds.

WHEN IN DOUBT, PRACTICE BELIEVING: A MESSAGE FROM RAYTHEON M. RAWLS AND MICHELLE WECKSLER

We all have certain issues that have the capacity to "push our buttons." We are always at the ready with arguments to prove that those whose views oppose ours are in the wrong or need to be "enlightened." But what if, instead, we chose to believe what our "opponent" was stating? What if we found truth in what they were saying? This is the challenge of the Believing Game.

One genuine challenge we all face is how to move forward when we are in conflict with someone, especially when there are **fundamental** differences in our worldviews, frames of reference, and perceptual filters. Whether at home or in the workplace we like to believe that we each have a sense of responsibility for creating an environment for effective communication and mutual understanding. To carry out this responsibility we must all develop skills and techniques for creating a human connection when values, worldviews and frames of reference clash. Empathy, defined as the innate human capacity to understand the unique experiences of another person, is essential to creating this connection.

When we are in conflict, each of us believes that we have a "lock" on the truth. In Western culture, we often arrive at the "truth" by thinking critically. Critical thinking, also known as methodological doubt, is a systematic, disciplined, and conscious attempt to doubt everything—to doubt hypotheses, beliefs, premises, and inferences, no matter how attractive or self-evident they seem, in order to find flaws or contradictions otherwise missed. "Question everything!" is the lesson critical thinking teaches us. Once we conduct our "critique," that which we doubt is often discarded and we are left with the "truth" – those things that cannot be doubted.

But what would happen if we chose to **believe** everything rather than to doubt everything? Peter Elbow, a professor of English at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, in his seminal work, *Methodological Doubting and Believing: Contraries in Inquiry* outlines a "believing" method (The Believing Game) for determining truth.[1] This reasoning tool, which he calls methodological belief, is a systematic, disciplined, and conscious attempt to **believe everything**—to believe all hypothesis, premises and inferences, no matter how unlikely or repellent they seem, in order to arrive at trustworthy knowledge. The practice of methodological belief simply means spending as much time and effort trying to believe an idea as is usually spent trying to find flaws in an idea.

Methodological belief is not just about listening. It is about actually trying to believe any view or hypothesis that an individual seriously wants to advance. **The goal of methodological belief is not to construct or defeat an argument, but rather to transmit an experience.** By playing this Believing Game empathy often emerges — the ability to **understand** the unique experiences of another.

What are the benefits to such an approach? In practicing methodological belief, unconsidered areas of agreement may emerge. We may begin to understand positions or perspectives that we have not considered before. We may also experience interpretations that have not previously fit into our established frames of reference.

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[1] Elbow, Peter, adapted from a speech delivered at the Reninger Lecture at the University of Northern Iowa in April 1983. Some of these ideas were explained in the appendix essay of Writing Without Teachers, Oxford University Press, 1973.

According to Psychologist George Miller,: *In order to understand what another person is saying, you must assume that it is true, and try to imagine what it could be true of.*[2] One does not literally have to "walk in another's shoes" to imagine what another's experience is, once certain information has been provided and assumed to be true. For example, if you are told that the temperature outside is 10 degrees, you do not have to actually go outside to feel empathy for the homeless and to experience and even act on the desire to relieve their suffering.

Practicing the Believing Game is an act of imagination. Empathy itself is an act of imagination. The Believing Games encourages what may be the most valuable intellectual or wisdom-generating event, mainly, the act of seeing the strength in another's position and the weakness in one's own.

Critical thinking alone, being essentially adversarial, tends to inhibit empathy. In a culture of critical thinking, people may find themselves "going along" because they feel persuaded, coerced, or defeated after they are shown all of the "flaws" in their perspective. They may continue to feel unheard or misunderstood.

Their "going along" may not reflect a change in the heart or a deeper understanding and, therefore no buy-in or commitment to any new resolution or outcome. The conflict may shift or go underground. When people cannot imaginatively understand the experiences of the other, decisions are all too often made based on who has power or who likes whom or who owes whom a favor. According to Elbow, emphasis solely on critical, deductive thinking reinforces doubt and promotes the belief in one right answer or one true answer. Also, simply picking apart an argument often shuts down deeper listening, the kind of listening that is essential to empathy in that it may lead to non-judgmental questioning and an openness to learn more about why people think and feel the way they do.

True communication and understanding can only occur when individuals have attempted to believe an idea or thought with care and honesty. Once a person has been fair to an idea, it is then possible to use critical thinking (doubting) to help make a judgment about the quality of the idea. The process of believing assumes that one person cannot know the entire truth, that different people catch different aspects of truth, and that beliefs can be expanded by "believing" the views of others.

Believing alone leads to naïve thinking and indoctrination. Doubting alone leads to close-mindedness and loss of creativity. Together, believing and doubting lead to constructive thinking, true insight, broadened perspectives and understanding.

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Attend one of our training programs to play the Believing Game and explore how methodological belief can assist you and your organization! www.adrgi.com

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[2] Elgin, Suzette H., **The Gentle Art of Verbal Self Defense for Business Success,** Tarames, New Jersey, Prentice Hall, 1989, p. 67

HOW DO YOU KNOW WHAT TO BELIEVE?

It happens every day. Someone in your life or in a newspaper or on television tries to get you to believe something. How do you decide whether to believe what you are being told? It is no secret that when individuals try to persuade us they place their own point of view in the best light possible. For those of us who manage conflict on a daily basis, we are familiar with the ways in which individuals will advocate for their position. Here are some persuasion techniques we encounter:

1. Information is conveniently left out and the information that is presented is "twisted" to support a specific viewpoint;
2. Emotional, as opposed to descriptive, words are used to try to appeal to our emotions;
3. Rather than spending time supporting their own position, the persuader spends a lot of time attacking the "other" side;
4. Flawed logic. Often, when we attempt to convince someone else to believe in our "truth," we don't realize that our logic is flawed;
5. Irrelevant or unrelated facts are brought into the discussion;
6. The persuader ignores what the other side has to say;
7. The persuader is closed to looking for alternative solutions or "truths."

How can we sort the wheat from the chaff when it comes to determining what we choose to believe? Here are some tips for responding to the persuaders so that we can give ourselves space to make up our own minds:

- Always ask yourself: Is there another side to this story?
- Be aware of the words that are being used. For example, if someone states that people from a religion other than their own are "evil," replace that emotional word in your mind with a behavioral word such as "different." Name-calling should always alert you to be on the look out!
- Learn different ways to "test" arguments. Test assumptions and looked for flawed logic.
- Finally, ask yourself if you have considered all perspectives and viewpoints.

BELIEVE IN YOURSELF FOR MOTIVATION, BELIEVE IN OTHERS TO SUCCEED – A MESSAGE FROM : BILL GALLATY

The keys to success have been discussed for years in thousands of books and articles. No matter what motivational "guru" you find most effective, the underlying message is always "*…believe in yourself.*" While I don't challenge the core teachings of these self-improvement coaches, I do want to propose the critical addition of *…believing in others* to achieve real success. In fact the very act of "heeding" the advice of the motivational guru is "believing" in someone else!

I can't think of any human endeavor that does not require some trust or belief in others (even a higher power) to succeed. Even single-player sports such as tennis require the athlete to believe in a coach and a trainer. Our belief in others is constantly tested in our social or commercial world because of the different lenses through which each of us views the world. Life's varying experiences change the very "focus" and hue of those lenses and can create a myopic approach to trusting and believing in others. Such restrictions will always limit success rather than increase it and in the worst cases produce failure.

Teamwork consists of more than everyone pulling in the same direction, it is

also the trust and belief that each team member is worthy and capable. So how is your belief system operating?

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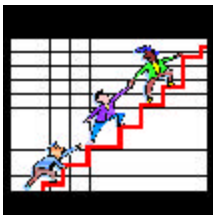
QUOTE OF THE MONTH

"When people are in pain or trouble, their deepest longing is to be understood as exceptions rather than rules."

- Arthur P. Ciaramicoli, Ed.D., PhD. and Katherine Ketcham, *The Power of Empathy*

A CHALLENGE TO YOU: UTILIZE THE BELIEVING GAME AS YOU COMMUNICATE



Peter Elbow believes that *methodological doub/critical* thinking is only half of what we need when we are examing issues. We do need the systematic, disciplined, and conscious attempts to criticize everything no matter how compelling it might seem—to find flaws or contradictions we might otherwise miss. However, Elbow suggests that thinking is not trustworthy unless it also includes *methodological belief*: the equally systematic, disciplined, and conscious attempt to *believe* everything no matter how unlikely or repellent it might seem—to find virtues or strengths we might otherwise miss.

How can you utilize both types of thinking to increase your own empathy and understanding of another's perspective? Whether you are reading someone else's thoughts or speaking directly with another person, here are some suggestions to expand your approach to thinking.

For methodological belief:

1. **Begin with an open mind**

   As a listener, prepare yourself to believe. Approach the conversation with a "let's see what this other person has to say" attitude. Try to actively listen without allowing an inner conversation to erupt in your mind (you know, that conversation in your head where you start to formulate responses while you're listening).

2. **Explore the belief**

   Summarize what you have heard to ensure understanding. To summarize, try beginning your sentence with phrases such as "If I understand you correctly," or "Let me make sure I am hearing what you are saying." Assume that the speaker has a valid point and that it is up to you to help the speaker make their point. Try asking one question that will provide you with more information regarding the other person's perspective. Be careful! Often we ask a question when our true intent is not to find out more information, but rather to show someone that their belief is ridiculous! Before you ask your question, ask yourself how the question will be received. Will the person want to go to lunch and talk about the issue or will they want to turn and walk away?

3. **Reflect on the discussion**

   Reflect on the entire communication. Ask yourself what the one, single belief the person is expressing. Look at how what the person said supports that belief. You

may even want to make an outline of the communication.

Once you have spent time believing you can begin to think with a critical mind. For methdological doubt:

1. **Allow questioning and doubt**

   Begin by reflecting on the "believing" you have done. Is what the other person said as valid as it seems? What assumptions are they making? What claims are they making that are unsubstantiated? Now do this exercise from your own perspective. What do you believe and what assumptions are you making? What claims of your own are unsubstantiatied?

2. **Examine agendas**

   Does the speaker/author have a particular agenda? Is this agenda impacting the message that they are communicating? Do you have an agenda and is your own agenda impacting your belief/communication?

3. **Counterpoints**

   Develop counterpoints for some of the points that the speaker has made. Try to present your counterpoints in the form of open-ended questions. Open-ended questions can assist in keeping the dialogue going. For example, "What about this issue of (fill in the blank)? How does that impact your perspective?" Anticipate the counterpoints that might be posed to you. How might you respond?

4. **Research other opinions and viewpoints**

   What have other people said about the issues you are dealing with? Have others had similar or opposing views? Have others had similar or opposing views to your counterpoints? How can these opinions inform your discussion?

5. **Achieve balance**

   Others are far more likely to listen to what you have to say if they themselves feel heard and if your message is presented in a way that addresses their concerns or interests. Persuading someone by attacking their views is one of the quickest ways to shut down communication. It is difficult to convince anyone of anything by arguing.

You can apply this approach to thinking whenever you encounter an issue on which individuals differ. Go ahead . . . we challenge you!

Share your success stories with us! If you utilize the Believing Game and find that it works for you, please e-mail us and share your story. We would welcome the opportunity to highlight your sucesses in our upcoming newsletters! E-mail us at info@adrgi.com.