

Both Sides Are Wrong: A Rule of Thumb for Navigating Conflict

Conflict isn't hard to find. You can't swing a cat without hitting some kind of disagreement between two people or groups of people.

Same applies to digital cats. Presumably those would be the kind you would swing on the internet (¯_(ツ)_/¯), where conflict only gets laid on thicker.

Navigating conflict with wisdom is one of the fundamental skills you need for a good life. So where should you start?

How You Get Rival Teams

A good place to begin is, well, not at the wrong place. This is unfortunately where most people begin. Most people stumble onto conflict and ask the worst possible question first: **which side is right?**

Conflict begins before there are sides to choose from. It usually begins with a disagreement over interpretation of a shared reality. Where did we come from? What kicked off the universe? How should we establish justice in our community? What is the best weightlifting technique? Who is the best at football?

At some point, more people sign up for the two or more interpretations. But at first at least, they are disputing a point about the same, shared reality.

Why Both Teams Are Wrong

Then things start to get crazy.

Once you get a quorum of people spending enough time gunning for your interpretation of reality, you've got yourself a little tribe. Now people joining what was once a disagreement about reality are now joining tribes. Now disagreements are not just disagreements about reality but insults to the pride and wellbeing of a tribe. Tribalism drives both groups further from reality, as a conflict goes from one of interpretation of reality to one of identity.

To the extent a conflict has polarized, well-developed "teams," you can be **quite sure** that **both** sides are missing something fundamental about reality. There's a direct correlation between the intensity of two factions' conflict and just how far away their views are from reality.

Need I give examples? The political left and the political right, the anti-theists and the fundamentalists, the cultural progressives and the cultural conservatives – these groups all

create destructive false dichotomies that just grow worse with every flare-up of disagreement.

To say that both sides here are wrong is not to make the simplistic reduction that **EVERYBODY IS BAD SO HIDE!** Instead, it's a sober recognition that all people make mistakes and have faults. It's to recognize that both sides have something important to say about reality. More importantly, it's to recognize that tribalism makes any truth a pretty low priority for factionalists.

Because neither side has the full grasp of truth (or even a good one), no team is unquestionable. No team's doctrine should ever come before logic and evidence. So even if you find a team that has got it mostly right, you should always proceed into any conflict with the assumption that both sides are wrong.

Of course, once you put logic and evidence first, you'll find yourself transcending just about any conflict between teams. You'll have returned to interpreting reality. You'll have returned to asking **what is right? instead of who is right?** You'll have reversed the original mistake of asking **which side is right?**

You'll face plenty of conflict in life. You can settle your part in it with the right questions. You don't have to pick sides, and you'll save yourself a lot of trouble if you don't. Instead, pick the complicated truth that doesn't fit into molds, but breaks them.